

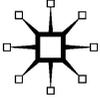
A Conservative Walks Into a Bar

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A Conservative Walks Into a Bar  
The Politics of Political Humor

*Alison Dagnes*

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*For Pete, Maddy, Caroline, and Gus who always cheered me on.  
And for Moni, who always cheered me up.*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Prologue</i>	xi
1 Who Brings the Funny?	1
2 Data, Experiments, and Proof	41
3 Mirroring the Political Climate: Satire in History	79
4 Art and Profession	133
5 Being Funny and Being Right, Being Left and Being Right	165
6 Conclusions	209
<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>Bibliography</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	235

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## Prologue

Otto von Bismarck is credited with saying, “Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made.” While true, politics are an important part of our society, and thanks to C-SPAN, we can watch the sausage-making happen live. Thanks to the rest of the media, we have nonstop winded reports and breathless analysis of all the politicking around the sausage-making, which makes for some pretty vivid descriptions of the meat grinding. Our political system is a big and messy one, and in modern America, it is also extremely divisive. It is, then, quite fortuitous that there is political humor with which to mock and distract us from the agonizing sorrow of modernity.

In 1991, I developed a deep and lasting love for political humor when I was working as a production assistant at C-SPAN. All the sausage-making must have taken its toll because I sought refuge in comedy, and lucky for me, it was a presidential election season: there was much to make fun of. *Saturday Night Live* banged a high mark with Dana Carvey’s impressions of George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot. Bill Clinton arrived on the national political scene from, of all places, Arkansas, and comedians had a field day with his “owl-sized” appetites. The year 1991 was also when Dennis Miller left *Saturday Night Live* and hit the road as a successful stand-up comedian, one who covered enough politics to make him a satirical dynamo. His comedy progressed throughout the Clinton era with predictable targets, but Miller also took aim at the hypocrisy of the Republican leadership in Congress and the conservative movement as a whole. He took shots at the left (PETA) and the right (evangelical Christians) and felt more libertarian in his sensibilities,

magnanimous in his foils, and I became a die-hard fan. Miller had an HBO show that ran for eight years, produced numerous books and CDs, and was at the top of his game when September 11 happened, and, in his own words, everything changed. He went from indignant Bush critic to fawning supporter in one immense and horrific national tragedy. It was a dramatic switch: before the attacks, immediately following the 2000 election, Miller said the following on his HBO program *Dennis Miller Live*:

And on Monday, movers went to the Governor's Mansion in Austin, Texas to transfer Bush's belongings to Washington. The move itself took very little time once workers discovered that Bush had nothing upstairs. Now, I don't want to get off on a rant here, but as a comedian, with George W. Bush coming into office, I feel like the owner of a hardware store before a hurricane. I hate to see it coming but I have to admit it's good for business (Miller 2002).

But after September 11, Miller became an outspoken supporter of President George W. Bush and the Bush administration's anti-terrorist policies, and this switch angered many of his fans on the left. He didn't anger me as much as he confused me, but he managed to annoy my friends who turned to me in bewilderment, wondering what I still liked about the guy. Miller was proud of his slide right, and asked in response to critics, "Well, can you blame me?" (Weinraub 2004). When speaking about the September 11 attacks, Miller said:

Everybody should be in the protection business now. I can't imagine anybody not saying that. Well, I guess on the farthest end of the left they'd say, "That's our fault." And on the middle end they'd say, "Well, there's another way to deal with it other than flat-out protecting ourselves." I just don't believe that. People say we're the ones who make them hate us because of what we do. That's garbage to me. I think they're nuts. And you've got to protect yourself from nuts (Weinraub 2004).

About Bush, Miller said in 2006:

The beautiful thing about Bush is that you always know where you can find him. That approval rating could go up to 70 or down to zero, and he ain't changing... We're in a war on terror, he knows it, and he's willing to let everybody hate him, but he's going to do what he feels he has to do (Deggans 2006).

He could have been talking about himself – someone willing to lose support because of his convictions. And lose support he did. At the same time that Dennis Miller turned rightward, Jon Stewart took the helm of *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) from former host Craig Kilborn. Stewart’s *TDS* became far more political than his predecessor’s version, and in the years following the September 11 attacks, as the United States first invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq, *TDS* became the go-to place for comedic analysis of some very serious subjects. Pretty soon, *Rolling Stone* magazine said Stewart’s brand of faux-journalism “beats the real thing,” the national party committees gave the show press credentials to cover their nominating conventions, and a public opinion poll after the death of Walter Cronkite named Stewart as the most trusted newsman in America. Big-name politicians began to appear on the show, and eventually included one sitting president, which gave the program more authority than ever. To recap: during the first years of the Bush administration, one of the more prominent political satirists lost some of his audience because he became “too conservative,” and a thundering mass of antiestablishment satire, led by the wild popularity of *TDS*, made its way into the meme. This odd confluence of events, combined with my steadfast devotion to Dennis Miller, made me look around and wonder, why is there so little conservative satire? It must have been a significant scarcity—I noticed it and I’m fairly liberal.

I glean from interviews that Miller and Stewart are friends, but even so it must have felt weird for Dennis Miller to watch his mantle as one of the nation’s leading political satirist fall so greatly. Miller still has a strong career today: although his HBO show was cancelled in 2002, he went on to cohost *Monday Night Football* for two years; he hosted another talk show, this one on CNBC, from 2003 to 2005; and he went to Fox News starting in 2006 as a guest commentator, first on *Hannity & Colmes* and then on *The O’Reilly Factor* where he is currently featured on a weekly segment called “Miller Time.” He also presently hosts a three-hour radio program that is syndicated by Westwood One, and he tours frequently as a comedian, performing in largish venues around the country. He remains a popular and well-known entertainer, if perhaps not as popular as he was once was, and can be characterized as the most prominent conservative satirist in America today. But that’s not a

very big statement because there is a sizable dearth of conservative satirists around. It is thanks to my Miller Fan Club membership that I embarked on this research project to find out why he was so alone.

I set out to answer this question by interviewing a significant number of comedians, satirists, and writers. This, of course, was actually a gambit to do “research” by talking with some very funny people, but along the way I discovered a great deal about humor, ideology, and modern political satire. I learned that political humor in general, and satire specifically, is a tough calling—one that beckons a fairly specific type of person to its ranks. But I also learned that the art of comedy shapes a joke based on audience, market, occasion, and context. I learned that conservatives believe in liberal bias and liberals don’t, that the satirist is separate from his (or her) material, and that none of these answers are complete or easy to reconcile. Modern political humor is a rich and important field, one that provides some of the most forceful and incisive commentary around today. But in our increasingly particularized political media system, there are efforts now to denounce the merits of political satire because conservatives say it is biased. So is it biased? Yes. Is this a problem? No. There are certainly more liberals in the trenches of political humor than there are conservatives, and this book addresses that. Political ideology does inform the material produced, and so there is an ensuing imbalance in the humor, but it is far outweighed by the fact that the driving force of modern satire is antiestablishmentarianism, and there is a mighty big difference between comedy and activism. Ideology clearly plays a role here because liberalism serves as a better foundation for satire than conservatism does, simply by virtue of its philosophy. Put another way: conservatives want to maintain the status quo and liberals want to change it. Satire aims at questioning the power structure—so why would conservatives want to do that? The short answer is, they don’t. But then why would conservatives complain about liberals dominating the satire industry? Because modern political humor has become a powerhouse of cultural influence and Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and their brethren wield an immense amount of sway among voters, especially young ones. When Fox News calls Jon Stewart an activist, it is specifically to discredit his political commentary, at least among Fox’s viewers. And since

Stewart spends a fair amount of time denouncing Fox News, all of this makes sense. But conservatives can relax, because for all of Jon Stewart's power, in the end he is an entertainer first and a liberal second. Furthermore, his liberalness makes him question all authority figures, and not just those on the right. The point of satire is to differentiate between what is and what should be, something those at *The Daily Show* and other political satirists do quite nicely, regardless of the politics involved.

I will admit that I was desperate to talk to Dennis Miller himself, and I threw my academic credentials at him, bundled in numerous interview requests. If my husband was quietly concerned about potentially erratic behavior on my part when I met the inspiration for my research, he needn't have worried: Miller rejected my every advance. At first he simply ignored me, but when confronted by the friend-of-a-friend-of-a-brother-of-a-friend with my request in hand, he was pretty adamant about it. So while Dennis Miller never spoke with me (although it certainly was not for lack of trying on my part), many other comedians and satirists did. I owe these men and women a tremendous amount of gratitude for their time and their insight, for without them I would still be guessing the answer to this question: who brings the funny and what does this funny look like?

I am not an expert in comedy. I am a political scientist who is interested in the way political messages are communicated and received. And so this book examines the politics of political humor so that we may better understand the role and consequence of modern political comedy and satire in America today.