White House Correspondents' Association Dinner 2006 Speech Study Guide

White House Correspondents' Association Dinner 2006 Speech by Stephen Colbert

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In April 2006, Stephen Colbert was a late-night cable-television comedian; by May, he was revered as the truth-telling jester in the farce of modern American media and politics. He delivered his speech at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner on April 29, 2006. Although comedians and other entertainers have been invited to the annual dinner before, and while both the press and the presidency have always been open for some gentle ribbing, Colbert was the first speaker to so harshly and hilariously attack those honored institutions. As a result, Colbert found himself condemned in some circles as a tasteless bully while being venerated as a great American satirist in others. As Adam Sternbergh of *New York Magazine* put it:

[Colbert] wound up delivering a controversial, possibly very funny, possibly horribly unfunny, possibly bravely patriotic, and possibly near-seditious monologue that earned him a crazed mob of lunatic followers who await his every command.

Since 1914, the White House Correspondents' Association has promoted the interests of reporters whose regular assignment is the presidency. The WHCA held its first dinner in 1920, and Calvin Coolidge established a tradition when he became the first sitting president to attend the dinner a few years later. Colbert, an actor and comedian best known for his satirical television show *The Colbert Report*, which pokes fun at popular but often uninformed political commentators on television, was evidently invited to address the White House Correspondents' Dinner because of his popularity among younger, hipper fans.

Colbert's show regularly displays the host's earnest stance on ridiculous topics, such as his list of individuals, organizations, and even concepts that are "On Notice," which is a form of chastisement. The list of those "on notice" has included singer Barbra Streisand, the British Empire, and grizzly bears (a running joke on the show is Colbert's fear and distrust of bears). Even more daunting is the list of those people and concepts that are "Dead to Me," in Colbert's parlance. This list includes New York intellectuals, bowtie pasta, and owls. Colbert coined the term "truthiness" to describe his brand of comic hot air. "Truthiness is 'What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.' It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that *I* feel it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality, but there's a selfish quality," Colbert explained in a 2006 interview with the *Onion's A.V. Club*. "Truthiness" was declared the Word of the Year 2005 by the American Dialect Society.

Stephen Colbert (the actor) explained the core of his show's humor to New York Magazine:

Language has always been important in politics, but language is incredibly important to the present political struggle. Because if you can establish an atmosphere in which information doesn't mean anything, then there is no objective reality. The first show we did, a year ago, was our thesis statement: What you wish to be true is all that matters, regardless of the facts. Of course, at the time, we thought we were being farcical.

In interviews, Colbert has repeatedly stressed that his TV persona is not himself but rather a character named "Stephen Colbert" who is an idiotic blowhard convinced of his own brilliance. "Stephen Colbert" is an overbearing, know-it-all jingo who takes the cotemporary culture of American politics and journalism to a ridiculous extreme. "We share the same name," Colbert says of "Colbert." "But he says things I don't mean with a straight face. On the street, I think people know the difference. But I'm not sure, when people ask me to go someplace, which one they've asked."

Author Biography

Stephen Colbert

Stephen Colbert was born May 13, 1964, in Charleston, South Carolina. He was the youngest of eleven children born to James and Lorna Colbert. When he was ten, his father and two of his brothers died in a plane crash on September 11, 1974. After a somewhat lonely childhood during which he developed a passion for science fiction, fantasy, and role-playing games, Colbert studied philosophy at Virginia's Hampden-Sydney College before transferring to Northwestern University to study acting. Eventually he joined Chicago's famous Second City Comedy group, where he met fellow performers Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello. With Sedaris and Dinello Colbert developed *Strangers With Candy*, which debuted in 1998, for the basic cable Comedy Central television network. By this time, Colbert was a regular correspondent on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, a parody of TV news programs.

After Jon Stewart started hosting *The Daily Show*, Colbert perfected his screen persona of the know-it-all-idiot. In the fall of 2005, Colbert got his own show on Comedy Central, *The Colbert Report*, which is pronounced "col-bare repore" for additional comic effect. Primarily inspired by politically conservative TV personality Bill O'Reilly, Colbert's persona is obnoxious, bullying, and blatantly ignorant. He burst into the mainstream American awareness with his speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner on April 29, 2006. As of 2007, Colbert lives with his wife Evelyn McGee-Colbert and their three children in New Jersey, where he also teaches Sunday school.

It is easy for some people to confuse the actor and his act. While many argued that Colbert's comments at the dinner were not his actual opinions but the absurd ramblings of a blustery but fictional construct, others took his pointed jokes at the expense of President Bush and the journalists assigned to cover the White House to be Colbert's true opinions about the relationship between the press and the president. Because the press is considered the watchdog of democracy, the public's primary defense against excessive government power and corruption, its independence and reliability are considered among the most precious hallmarks of the American way of life. If it is the press's job to keep an eye on the government, Colbert's gutsy speech reminded the press that his job as a comedian is to keep an eye on them.

Plot Summary

Stephen Colbert begins his speech by jokingly announcing that a throng of conspicuous high-security vehicles need to be moved to make way for another identical throng of vehicles. Colbert goes on to describe President Bush as "my hero" and asks somebody to pinch him because he must be dreaming. Appearing to second-guess himself, Colbert recommends that somebody shoot him in the face, alluding to Vice President Cheney's recent hunting accident. He also recommends that anyone who needs anything lean over and speak slowly and clearly into their table numbers so that operatives of the National Security Administration can take their orders—an allusion to the rumors that the Bush administration engaged in unlawful spying on American citizens.

Colbert claims that he and the president approach the truth in the same way: "We're not brainiacs on the nerd patrol…. We go straight from the gut, right sir? That's where the truth lies, right down here in the gut."He goes on to explain that there are more nerve endings in the gut than in the head and that on his show he gives people "the truth, unfiltered by rational argument." He has created what he calls the "No Fact Zone," then warns Fox News that the term is copyrighted, hinting that the network might want to use it as well. This is an allusion to the right-leaning network's use of the term "No Spin Zone" on *The O'Reilly Factor*, Bill O'Reilly's popular but controversial Fox program.

Colbert then claims that he is a simple man, like the president, and rattles off a list of fundamental beliefs. This list is absurd because it consists of easily verifiable facts rather than actual philosophical positions. Next he claims that democracy is America's number one export, "at least until China figures out a way to stamp it out of plastic for three cents a unit." Colbert then greets the Chinese ambassador, Ambassador Zhou Wenzhong, who is in attendance. Next on his list of beliefs is Thomas Jefferson's famous line, "The government that governs best is the government that governs least," then uses that line of reasoning to assert that the United States has "set up a fabulous government in Iraq."

Before rounding out his list, Colbert, with great apparent magnanimity and sincerity, tells the crowd he respects all religions, noting, "I believe there are infinite paths to accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior."

Colbert returns his attention to President Bush, specifically addressing Bush's low approval rating in many polls. "Sir, pay no attention to the people who say the glass is half empty, because 32 percent means it's two-thirds empty." Colbert then goes on to compare Bush to the protagonist of the movie *Rocky* before appearing to suddenly recall that Rocky loses his fight at the end of the film.

Colbert next claims he stands by the president: "I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands on things." Colbert alludes to several of President Bush's widely covered public appearances: aboard the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* during which the flight-suited president proclaimed "mission

accomplished" in Iraq, among the ruins of the World Trade Centers following the 9/11 attacks, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans's Jackson Square. He says these events send "a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound—with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world."

Colbert discusses the Chief Executive's awareness of the energy crisis. Colbert notes that Bush spends a lot of time cutting brush on his ranch in Texas. Because of this, Colbert claims, by 2008 the country will have "a mesquite-powered car." Colbert mentions that the president is a regular guy who loves his wife, Laura. Unfortunately, the First Lady's "reading initiative" does not sit well with Colbert, who does not like, trust, or believe in books because they "[tell] us what is or isn't true, or what did or didn't happen." He claims that it is the right of all Americans, like the president, to make up "facts" to suit them.

Returning to the president, Colbert praises his firmness of mind: "He believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday. Events can change; this man's beliefs never will."

Having thoroughly mocked President Bush while pretending to praise him, Colbert turns his attention to the press. He claims he is appalled to find representatives of the press at a White House dinner, explaining:

I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, with the exception of Fox News.

Colbert continues in his ironic vein, celebrating the news industry for not depressing the American people by spending time covering tax cuts, weapons of mass destruction, and the environment. Colbert says, "Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew." He sums up the apparent relationship between the White House and the press corps, saying their job is to print what the White House tells them, and that they can daydream about bold reporters who challenge the administration if they take up a career writing fiction.

He chides the reporters for saying the administration is "just rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*" when the White House does something that the public has clamored for. "This administration is not sinking. This administration is soaring." He quips that the administration has more in common with a doomed 1937 airship that burst into flames and fell from the sky than a doomed 1912 ocean liner.

After noting certain journalists are "heroes" (Colbert's term for fans of his show), such as Christopher Buckley, Ken Burns, and Bob Schieffer, Colbert points out that these men have appeared on *The Colbert Report*. He then alludes to a controversy in which it appeared that President Bush would appear on the show but did not do so. Colbert remarks that he will bump liberal commentator Frank Rich to make room for Bush.

Colbert focuses on various notables in attendance at the dinner. Specifically he notes the presence of Generals Moseley and Pace: "They still support Rumsfeld. Right, you guys aren't retired yet, right?" Both men remained supportive of the Bush White House

and then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, even while many retired generals have criticized the handling of the war in Iraq. He also mentions the presence of civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, whose determination to speak his mind Colbert compares to boxing a glacier. "Enjoy the metaphor," Colbert adds, "because your grandchildren will have no idea what a glacier is," a swipe at Bush's environmental policies.

Supreme Court justice Anthony Scalia is in attendance and Colbert greets him while making hand gestures. Scalia had recently drawn criticism for apparently making obscene gestures to a reporter while discussing political enemies. The justice laughs heartily in response to Colbert. Colbert greets maverick Republican Senator John McCain by mentioning the Senator's plans to speak at Bob Jones University, a very conservative Christian school in South Carolina, where Colbert claims to still have a summer home. This quip is a subtle jab at McCain, often a vocal critic and opponent of President Bush, who seems to be returning to more conventional Republican behavior.

Colbert greets former ambassador Joe Wilson and jokes about Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, whose status as an undercover CIA agent was famously (and possibly illegally) revealed through a government leak. Many observers believe the leak was a deliberate attempt to punish Wilson for criticisms he had earlier made about the Bush administration. Colbert pretends to inadvertently reveal Plame's identity, then breathes a false sigh of relief that special prosecutor Patrick Kennedy, who was appointed to investigate "Plamegate," is not present. Colbert also kids newly appointed press secretary Tony Snow, cautioning Snow that he has "big shoes to fill. Scott McClellan could say nothing like nobody else." McClellan was the previous press secretary.

Colbert then complains that he wishes President Bush had not rushed to choose Snow; Colbert claims he wanted the job of press secretary for himself. At this point, Colbert screens an "audition tape" he allegedly prepared. The tape features clips of White House journalists asking tough questions spliced in with footage of Colbert dodging or ignoring them. However, the tables turn on Colbert when veteran correspondent Helen Thomas begins to stalk him. The tape then becomes a parody of horror movies, with Colbert fleeing the slow-moving yet relentless Thomas while scary music plays on the soundtrack. Eventually Colbert seems to escape by taking a shuttle from Washington to New York. However, when he gets into his car and asks the uniformed driver to take him home, the driver turns around and says, "Sure thing, hon." The chauffeur is in fact Helen Thomas, and the skit ends with Colbert pressing his terrified face against the car window and screaming. After the mock audition tape ends, Colbert thanks the president and the audience, apparently with total sincerity.

Themes

The First Amendment

The U.S. Constitution, as it was accepted in 1787, focuses on the organization, power, and responsibilities of the federal government. The Bill of Rights, as the first ten amendments to the Constitution are collectively known, explicitly grants important personal freedoms to individuals. The Bill of Rights became the law of the land in 1792. The first of these amendments protects people's right to believe and say what they wish with this single sentence:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Not all speech is protected: that which may pose a "clear and present danger" to the government, obscene or pornographic art, and libel and slander against public or private persons are some types of restricted expression. Furthermore, not every citizen supports every First Amendment safeguard in American society. The issues of prayer in school, the Ten Commandments in courthouses, flag burning, offensive art, conscientious objection, and tabloid journalism are all quandaries posed by the First Amendment. However, Americans' freedoms to worship as they please, exchange ideas, and question the government are cornerstones of the American dream By exercising his rights to express himself and question the government, and by rebuking the press for slacking in their responsibilities, Stephen Colbert championed the First Amendment and dared others to do so as well.

Satire and Political Humor

Satire is a form of social commentary that attacks human failures and shortcomings, often through the use of verbal irony. In essence, verbal irony means that what is said is the opposite of what is meant; thus when a person says "boy, what a nice day" during a violent thunderstorm, he really means the day is ugly and miserable. Satirists often employ vicious irony in their attacks on human nature and institutions, sometimes using greatly exaggerated examples and characters for comic effect. Satire is one of the most important elements in political humor, which makes fun of government personnel, agencies, or activities.

The satiric tradition is as old as human literacy itself. The leading satirists of the Classical period were the Romans Horace and Juvenal. To this day, works of satire are classified as either Horatian (gentle and urbane) or Juvenalian (biting and more vulgar). During the Age of Enlightenment (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the English poet and satirist John Dryden published a translation of Juvenal in 1693. This

translation included Dryden's "A Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire," which became the standard definition of satire in English. Best known as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, which in spite of its reputation as a children's book is actually a sophisticated piece of adult satire, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) is often cited as the greatest satirist in English literature. Perhaps Swift's most influential work is his "A Modest Proposal" (1729), in which the author appears to advocate cannibalism of poor children as a means of alleviating overpopulation and reducing poverty. "A Modest Proposal" is a masterpiece of irony because Swift's outrageous plan is presented with a straight face. In fact, Swift's apparent sincerity inspired controversy, because many readers thought he was serious; even today many students are convinced Swift actually believes that eating children is a good idea, although a careful reading of the essay reveals Swift's true motivation, which is to support reasonable reforms in society to alleviate human suffering.

The American satirical tradition can be traced back at least to 1707, when Ebenezer Cooke published "The Sot-Weed Factor," a Juvenalian attack on the attitudes and activities of both early settlers and American Indians. In the nineteenth century, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, aka Mark Twain, wrote many satirical pieces, though many did not appear in print until after his death. Among his most famous is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), which mocks both political and social folly. Former Civil War officer Ambrose Bierce is best remembered for his war and horror stories, which are often laced with grim irony. However, Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*, first published in book form as *The Cynic's Work-Book* in 1906, is his sharpest satirical work. *The Devil's Dictionary* contains such definitions as "Idiot" ("a member of a large and powerful tribe whose influence in human affairs has always been dominant and controlling") and "Love" ("a temporary insanity curable by marriage").

In more recent times, satire has been associated with the mass media, including movies and television. Based on a short story by Budd Schulberg, Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) features legendary television star Andy Griffith as a vile thug who manages to become a powerful television star by presenting a charming, folksy persona to millions of viewers. The film's depiction of television's often pernicious influence on the general public is still powerful today. Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* (1970), based on Richard Hooker's novel, lampooned the Vietnam War by presenting a story set during the Korean War of the 1950s. Alex Cox's *Walker* (1987) uses a similar technique of mocking current events with a story set in the past. Based on the life of William Walker, a nineteenth-century military adventurer who became president of Nicaragua in 1857, the film satirizes the Reagan Administration's involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, a scandal in which elements of the U.S. government sold arms to the rogue nation of Iran to fund anti-Communist guerillas (the Contras) in Nicaragua.

Television comedies have always incorporated a degree of satiric humor, but sketch comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *MadTV* have regularly mocked politicians, celebrities, and life in general. The often absurd and exaggerated humor of these programs can be directly traced to the British TV show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, although other influences from popular culture have also had an impact. With the rise of original cable television programming, such programs as *South Park* and

Robot Chicken have reached comparatively small but extremely devoted audiences; like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, these shows frequently make fun of politicians and the government.

Political humor has been a mainstay of American culture since before the American Revolution. Highly satiric political humor was a primary trait in the English tradition of journalism, which itself was influenced by the writings of ancient Roman satirists. All American chief executives have been attacked by political humorists, usually by artists and writers in the employ of opposition parties. America is a country founded on protest, and it remains a traditional part of the society that even the most powerful and respected people and institutions are never above being targeted for criticism. Like it or loathe it, Colbert's speech is a demonstration of Americans' national right to satirize their leaders and the mechanisms of their culture.

Freedom of the Press

Stephen Colbert's speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner gained notoriety because it seemed like a comic attack on President Bush. However, Colbert's speech is just as critical of the mainstream press—perhaps more so. It is one of the basic principles of American democracy that the press is responsible for keeping the voting populace informed by keeping tabs on the government, watching carefully for abuse, corruption, misinformation, and incompetence on the part of elected or appointed officials. Colbert's remarks to the press corps are particularly caustic, implying that the assembled journalists had not been sufficiently skeptical of the Bush administration's policies in particular, and of government in general.

Since the earliest days of the republic, journalists have been charged with keeping an eye on the government and encouraging dissent when authorities have shirked or failed in their duties. Writers such as Thomas Paine published pamphlets that encouraged the weary colonists to continue their support for the Revolutionary movement that resulted in American independence from Great Britain, and ever since then journalists have crusaded for social justice and the punishment of wrongdoing on the part of elected officials. The best-known example of American journalists performing their watchdog role is the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, which resulted in the downfall of President Richard M. Nixon. Two reporters for the *Washington Post*, Carl Bernstein and Robert Woodward, investigated the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in 1972, a burglary committed by associates of prominent officials of the Nixon White House. At attempt to cover up the connection between the burglars and the Nixon administration failed, and ultimately President Nixon resigned in 1974 rather than face impeachment.

Woodward and Bernstein became heroes of a sort among young journalism students, but in the years since there have been indications that the press has failed to watch the government as carefully as it should. For one thing, the rise of television news eroded newspaper readership; the decline in circulation has encouraged major news dailies to focus less on "hard" news and more on "feature" news, such as entertainment. At the

same time, more and more newspapers closed down or combined with other papers, and increasing numbers of papers were bought by major media conglomerates whose focus is more on the bottom line than reporting the news.

Some liberal critics have charged that the contemporary press corps seems unwilling or unable to push the Bush administration to fully disclose information relevant to the public good. On the other hand, many conservatives believe the mainstream media are biased against President Bush in particular and conservative politicians in general. Indeed, many polls suggest that the American public believe major print and television journalists are biased in favor of liberal causes and politicians. Mainstream journalists are supposed to be objective in their reporting; charges of bias on either or both sides of an issue often clouds both the media's and the public's perception of the goings-on in the modern world.

Historical Context

The White House Correspondents' Association Dinner

Formed by eleven charter members on February 25, 1914, the White House Correspondents' Association exists for "the promotion of those reporters and correspondents assigned to cover the White House." The organization was formed in response to a rumor that President Woodrow Wilson was planning a series of press conferences to which only certain reporters would be invited. The WHCA hosted its first Correspondents' Dinner in 1920; in 1924, Calvin Coolidge became the first president to attend the dinner, thereby establishing a tradition followed by almost every chief executive since.

For many years the annual dinner emphasized entertainment, which was often provided by popular singers and other performers of the Great Depression. The dinner became more subdued during World War II, but by the 1990s entertainers were once again being invited to address the WHCA and its guests. Such performers as Jon Stewart, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Jay Leno, and Cedric the Entertainer have provided the entertainment in the years since. Comedians often "roast" the president and his administration, and White House residents have even gotten in on the fun: In 2000 President Clinton appeared in a short film spoofing his last days in office, and in 2005 First Lady Laura Bush delivered a well-received comedy routine that gently mocked her husband and his cabinet.

The WHCA has always operated outside of the normal White House credentialing process, a decision the organization feels is necessary to safeguard journalists' responsibility to cover presidents objectively. According to the WHCA website, the organization "stands for inclusiveness in the credentialing process so that the White House remains accessible to all journalists," a mission that is "consistent with the First Amendment." It is a bedrock principle of American culture that newspapers and other news outlets serve as watchdogs of the government; by protecting and promoting the First Amendment to the Constitution, journalists fulfill their role as promoters of the American dream of open and accessible government.

Political Punditry

In 1987, the Federal Communications Commission repealed its "fairness doctrine," which required broadcasters to present balanced coverage of controversial matters of public importance. The decision allowed television and radio stations to begin airing political commentary without having to necessarily feature opposing points of view.

Although the United States, like any other free country, has always been home to various factions that argue among themselves, it seems that the nature of public debate has abandoned the high road in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. There

is no single explanation or cause for these tendencies, but cultural critics place a lot of blame on the rise of television talk shows that present contentious, even combative, guests and hosts. So-called "trash TV" programs such as *The Jerry Springer Show* rarely pertain directly to serious political issues, but the circus-like atmosphere of these shows has spilled over into the new generation of news and current-events programming.

Foremost among the broadcasters who benefited from the repeal of the "fairness doctrine" was veteran radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who rose to unprecedented levels of national success following the syndication of his talk show in 1988. Unapologetically conservative and given to making sarcastic, often highly controversial on-air pronouncements, Limbaugh emerged as the symbol of the "neoconservative" movement of the 1990s. Inspired by Limbaugh, a number of other conservative commentators emerged, finding success on radio, television, and the Internet. Like Limbaugh, these commentators incorporated irony, satire, and often inflammatory statements to get the attention of supporters and opponents alike. Bill O'Reilly and Anne Coulter have been among the most popular—and at times polarizing—of these neoconservative personalities during the George W. Bush era.

Critical Overview

Time enough has not yet passed for cultural and political critics to examine Colbert's 2006 speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner with the benefit of hindsight. Initially, most of the mainstream newspapers neglected to discuss the Colbert speech in any great detail. However, the speech did inspire passionate responses from both liberal and conservative bloggers on the Internet, leading one group of fans to start the website thankyoustephencolbert.org to express their admiration. "Stephen Colbert delivered a biting rebuke of George W. Bush and the lily-livered press corps," announces blogger Peter Daou the day after the speech. The editors of the *American Federalist Journal* comment on their blog, "The Unalienable Right," that Colbert's speech was "mostly unfunny" and "tedious." By contrast, Joan Walsh on salon. com remarks of her reaction to Colbert's speech:

I'm enjoying watching apologists for the status quo wear themselves out explaining why Colbert wasn't funny…. For those who think the media shamed itself by rolling over for this administration, especially in the run-up to the Iraq war, Colbert's skit is the gift that keeps on giving.

The major papers eventually picked up the story, but as television critic Doug Elfman writes in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "The media's implosion of silence could be one of the final reasons many liberals use to not turn on TV news," getting their information from blogs and websites instead. In the pages of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Dante Chinni claims that the debate over Colbert's remarks suggested that the traditional Correspondents' dinner should be ended, since it merely celebrates the "coziness" of Washington media with political figures. Chinni observes that "Journalists have slid in the public's estimation over the past 20 years, and if they want to try to recapture their standing, they need to reassert their independence" from the political establishment. The attacks on Colbert seemed to confirm that most journalists would rather not deal with the thorny issues raised by his critiques of the Bush administration—and modern journalism.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

In the following article, Hilden explores the importance of parody and free speech in public discourse.

Stephen Colbert's April 30th keynote address to the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner continues to spark commentary even now, more than a week later—with the video and the transcript still widely circulated on the Internet. Why?

Clips of Stephen Colbert delivering his speech at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner are widely available on the Internet, and the C-SPAN network sells a DVD of the Dinner at www.c-spanarchives.org/shop and through other websites.

One reason the story has had "legs," it seems, is the contention that Colbert crossed an invisible line, and the retort that either such a line shouldn't exist, or that Colbert was entitled to cross it. (For those unfamiliar with Colbert, he's the satirical host of "*The Colbert Report*"—a parody of a pundit show, lampooning the likes of Fox's "The O'Reilly Factor" and MSNBC's "*Scarborough Country*"—appearing four nights a week on the cable network Comedy Central.)

Interestingly, Bush supporters aren't alone in claiming that Colbert went too far in his routine. Indeed, even Democratic House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer said, "I thought some of it was funny, but I think it got a little rough. He is the President of the United States, and he deserves some respect." Hoyer felt Colbert "crossed the line" with many jokes that were "in bad taste."

In this column, I'll draw on ideas from First Amendment doctrine to try to explain many people's intuition that Colbert crossed a line, but also, using the same doctrine, I will argue that Colbert's performance reaffirms the importance and power of parody to free speech and public debate.

Critical Essay #2

I think part of the intuition arises from the fact that the unhappy—and seemingly insulted—president couldn't practicably leave while the speech was going on.

Recently, Michael Dorf wrote a perceptive column for this site on the role of the "captive audience" in First Amendment doctrine. As Dorf suggests, an audience may be deemed "captive," in free speech doctrine, when its attendance is either legally required (Dorf's example is teens' attendance at public school), or socially required (Dorf's example is family members' attendance at a funeral). Speakers' First Amendment rights to reach the ears of such audiences may be less than their rights to reach the ears of, say, passersby in the public square.

The Correspondents' Dinner was the rare instance where the president was himself a captive audience of one. By comparison, the president has the ability to stop taking questions at a press conference at any time, or simply to send new White House Press Secretary Tony Snow to field questions on his behalf. (Even presidential candidates can now be insulated from criticism—thanks to "free speech zones" at conventions, which I wrote about in a prior column.)

But the president could not have fled Colbert's speech, except at great cost. The Correspondents' Dinner was being broadcast on C-SPAN, with the media attending in full force. And there has long been a presumption that, at the dinner, the president will take the mockery handed out graciously. In sum, the president doesn't really have the option to leave the Correspondents' Dinner: Whatever happens, the tradition is that he must grin and bear it.

At some point, though, Bush stopped grinning and, by most accounts, looked annoyed; *Salon's* Michael Scherer described him as "tight-lipped," and warned that Colbert, who'd violated the protocol of a typically "fawning" event, was unlikely to be invited back.

I think the "captive audience" aspect of the event was one reason why Colbert's speech had the breath-holding, sickening/thrilling quality of wedding speeches that tread much too close to the bone. The audience could almost be overheard wondering to themselves, "What will he say next, and what will his target do?" And the president was just as unlikely to walk off the podium, as a bride and groom would be to walk out of their own reception.

Critical Essay #3

Many observers intuitively feel that the president suffered a political attack, rather than merely enduring a comedy routine.

As Americans, we're used to comedy that is observational—aren't people funny?—not comedy that is pointed: Isn't the president ignorant and out of touch with reality? We're also not used to satire—as Scherer points out in his Salon.com piece. Indeed, Scherer himself goes back to "the Situationists in France" to find a fit parallel for Colbert's "ironic mockery."

Moreover, we are used to comedy routines that string together bite-sized, stand-alone jokes—routines that can be reduced to individual "bits"—not themed attacks like Colbert's, where one joke refers back to the next, and jokes are repeated, with variations.

Colbert was relentless. He repeatedly targeted, for instance, Bush's 32% approval rating. Indeed, Colbert even suggested that the president's scant remaining support is worthless, advising him, "Sir, pay no attention to the people who say the glass is half empty, because 32% means it's 2/3 empty. There's still some liquid in that glass is my point, but I wouldn't drink it. The last third is usually backwash."

A little later, Colbert flipped the statistic—referring to the disapproving 68%: "Don't pay attention to the approval ratings that say 68% of Americans disapprove of the job this man is doing. I ask you this, does that not also logically mean that 68% approve of the job he's not doing?"

Colbert also repeatedly suggested that the president ignores facts ("Events can change; this man's beliefs never will."), that he doesn't read books, and that his embattled Administration is only headed for further, worse trouble.

In sum, with the president effectively trapped, and at his mercy, Colbert chose to inflict blows upon bruises—smashing Bush at length on topics that must already smart, from Iraq war debacles, to warrantless wiretapping, to the Valerie Plame scandal, where allegations have now reached up to the level of the president and Vice president themselves.

Critical Essay #4

Colbert launched his vituperative parody when there was no forum for the president—or anyone speaking on his behalf—to reply. Again, First Amendment doctrine seems relevant: While concepts like "equal time" now seem relics of the Sixties and Seventies, and the FCC long ago junked the "fairness doctrine," we still remain more comfortable with harsh speech when the target has a chance to quickly respond.

All else being equal, the situation would seem especially unfair in First Amendment terms because the brand of irony of which Colbert is a master serves—as Scherer points out, quoting David Foster Wallace—"an almost exclusively negative function" for which there is no easy response.

However, all else is not equal. The president, with his "bully pulpit," has a platform from which to command attention, and a national audience, as no other individual can. If he decides to address the nation, his remarks will be televised on all networks, and will pre-empt other programs.

Not only does the Bush Administration command an audience virtually at will, but this particular administration has controlled criticism and discussion to a remarkable degree. To cite but a few examples: during his campaigns and in promoting his major initiatives, the president has held scripted "town meetings" in which the audiences are carefully screened so there's little chance of critical questions; he has censored scientific reports of the Environmental Protection Agency and NASA that don't toe the Administration line about global warming; and he has held the fewest number of press conferences of any modern president.

Considering the extensive limitations imposed on the ability to question or criticize this president, it is understandable that given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to publicly roast him, Colbert seized it. Colbert's in-the-President's-face parody followed the tradition of Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century political cartoonists whose caustic renderings of public figures and officials were devastating, as the newspapers they were printed in were the near-exclusive sources for the public's news.

As the late Chief Justice Rehnquist recognized, in discussing Nineteenth Century political cartoonist Thomas Nast, "The success of the Nast cartoon was achieved 'because of the emotional impact of its presentation. It continuously goes beyond the bounds of good taste and conventional manners.'" According to Rehnquist, despite the caustic nature of such satires—ridiculing the presidents of the time—they "played a prominent role in public and political debate" and "[f]rom the viewpoint of history it is clear that our political discourse would have been considerably poorer without them."

Despite the caustic nature of Colbert's satire, it is clear that given the extent to which the Bush Administration, elected officials, the news media, pundits, and the public have continued to talk about and debate his keynote—more than a week after Colbert delivered it—Colbert, like Nast before him, has enriched our political discourse.

That he did so with the president as a captive audience may have defied protocol, but in light of the protocols regarding public debate that this president has defied, it should be viewed as fair play.

In the end, we shouldn't so automatically accept contentions like Hoyer's claim that "He is the president of the United States, and he deserves some respect." Respect ought to be based on what one does and says, not on the office one occupies. And even when the president deserves respect, he must also be accountable. Seeking to hold a president accountable through use of a caustic parody that exploits politically embarrassing events is in the best tradition of the First Amendment and encourages the robust public debate democracy requires.

Source: Julie Hilden, "Did Stephen Colbert Cross a Free Speech Line at the White House Correspondents' Dinner? And If So, What Defined the Line?", in *FindLaw's Writ*, May 9, 2006, p. 1.

Bibliography

"About the WHCA," on *White House Correspondents' Association*, www.medill.northwestern.edu/whca (May 2, 2006).

The Charters of Freedom," *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters.html (October 29, 2006).

Chinni, Dante, "Pulling the Plug on the White House Correspondents Dinner," in the *Christian Science Monitor*, www.csmonitor.com/2006/0509/p09s02-codc.html (May 9, 2006).

Daou, Peter, "Ignoring Colbert: A Small Taste of the Media's Power to Choose the News," in the *Daou report*, April 30, 2006, daoureport.salon.com/default.aspx?archiveDate=4/30/2006 (November 6, 2006).

Donovan, Bryce, "Great Charlestonian?… Or the Greatest Charlestonian?", in the *Charleston Post and Courier*, April 29, 2006, p F 1.

Elfman, Doug, "Did Media Miss Real Colbert Story?", in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, www.suntimes.com (May 7, 2006).

Frederick, "Re-improved Colbert Transcript (Now With Complete Text of Colbert-Thomas Video!)," *Daily Kos*, dailykos.com/storyonly/2006/4/30/1441/59811 (April 30, 2006).

"On Notice/Dead to Me," on the *Colbert Nation*, www.colbertnation.com/cn/notice-dead.php (October 3, 2006).

Rabin, Nathan, "Interview: Stephen Colbert," in *A. V. Club*, www.avclub.com/content/node/44705 (January 25, 2006).

Solomon, Deborah, "Funny About the News," in the *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com (September 25, 2005).

Sternbergh, Adam, "Stephen Colbert Has America by the Ballots," in *New York Magazine*, newyorkmetro.com/news/politics/22322 (October 12, 2006).

"The White House Correspondents Dinner," on *The Unalienable Right*, www.federalistjournal.com/fedblog/?m=200604 (April 30, 2006).

Walsh, Joan, "Making Colbert Go Away," on *Salon.com*, www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/05/03/correspondents (May 3, 2006).

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535