

# Bush, US media respond to Stephen Colbert's comic assault: "We are not amused"

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At the White House Correspondents' Association dinner April 29, satirist Stephen Colbert (of "The Colbert Report" on the Comedy Channel) delivered a biting, ironic monologue directed at President George W. Bush and the media establishment.

With Bush seated only a few feet away, Colbert, as is his wont, impersonated a right-wing blowhard, calling on the president to ignore the polls ("Guys like us, we don't pay attention to the polls. 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") and praising the press for its subservience to the administration ("Over the last five years you people were so good—over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We 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 skewered Bush: "I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands *on* things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound—with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world."

He zeroed in on "Fox News," which "gives you both sides of every story: the president's side, and the vice president's side." He suggested the way to handle "these retired generals causing all this trouble" was not to let them retire. Noting that he had seen retired Gen. Anthony "Zinni and that crowd" on television talk shows, Colbert continued, "If you're strong enough to go on one of those pundit shows, you can stand on a bank of computers and order men into battle."

Colbert deftly punctured Republican Sen. John McCain's 'maverick' reputation: "Somebody find out what fork he used on his salad, because I guarantee you it wasn't a salad fork. This guy could have used a spoon! There's no predicting him." He also urged his audience to enjoy a metaphor he employed about "boxing a glacier...because your grandchildren will have no idea what a glacier is."

The comic implored the media not to report on "NSA wiretapping or secret prisons in eastern Europe." Instead, "Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you've got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know—fiction!" This stung particularly sharply.

Colbert concluded with a video in which he imagines himself the new White House press secretary, lying, evading, double talking, and, finally, pursued by Helen Thomas, the veteran UPI and now Hearst Newspapers correspondent, who insists on knowing why the US invaded Iraq.

The audience at the dinner, composed of politicians, journalists and entertainment figures, responded for the most part in a distinctly muted manner to Colbert's monologue. Bush was clearly furious. According to *US News & World Report*, Colbert "won a rare silent protest from Bush aides and supporters Saturday when several independently left before he finished. 'Colbert crossed the line,' said one top Bush aide, who rushed out of the hotel as soon as Colbert finished. Another said that the president was visibly angered by the sharp lines that kept coming. 'I've been there before, and I can see that he is [angry],' said a former top aide. 'He's got that look that he's ready to blow.' "

The leading media outlets were apparently "not amused" either by Colbert's performance. Remarkably, Elizabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times*, in her account of the dinner, failed to mention Colbert's name! She recounts in some detail the appearance of Steve Bridges, a Bush impersonator, who collaborated with Bush in a skit. Bumiller diligently reports about the preparations for the Bridges-Bush act ("Last Friday was the dress rehearsal with Mr. Bridges in the White House family theater. Mr. Bartlett and Joshua B. Bolten, the new White House chief of staff, attended, but many other senior aides were kept out to keep it secret. Mr. Bush and Mr. Bridges did two straight run-throughs"), but never makes a single reference to Colbert's 20-minute monologue, in which the White House Press corps, of which Bumiller is a member, came under attack for its cowardice.

The *Washington Post*, the Associated Press and Reuters all provided scant coverage of Colbert's appearance. The television networks largely ignored his comments. As news of Colbert's monologue spread, thanks to the Internet, certain in the media felt obliged to account for the initial silence. The *New York Times* assigned Jacques Steinberg the task of attempting to cover its particular posterior. Noting that Colbert's comments were creating a great stir (Comedy Central had received 2,000 email messages by May 1), Steinberg wrote, "Others chided the so-called mainstream media, including The New York Times, which ignored Mr. Colbert's remarks while writing about the opening act, a self-deprecating bit Mr. Bush did with a Bush impersonator. Some, though, saw nothing more sinister in the silence of news

organizations than a decision to ignore a routine that, to them, just was not funny.”

This became the second line of defense. Colbert was simply not amusing. As if that were the issue! Colbert’s angry irony was certainly likely to go over the head not only of Bush, but of most members of the political and media establishment. He ridiculed American philistinism, in its own voice. Speaking of Bush, for example, Colbert explained, “We’re not so different, he and I. We get it. We’re not brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We’re not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut—right, sir? That’s where the truth lies, right down here in the gut. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. I know some of you are going to say ‘I did look it up, and that’s not true.’ That’s ‘cause you looked it up in a book.

“Next time, look it up in your gut. I did. My gut tells me that’s how our nervous system works. Every night on my show, the Colbert Report, I speak straight from the gut, OK? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument. I call it the ‘No Fact Zone.’ Fox News, I hold a copyright on that term.

“I’m a simple man with a simple mind. I hold a simple set of beliefs that I live by. Number one, I believe in America. I believe it exists. My gut tells me I live there. I feel that it extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and I strongly believe it has 50 states. And I cannot wait to see how the *Washington Post* spins that one tomorrow. I believe in democracy. I believe democracy is our greatest export. At least until China figures out a way to stamp it out of plastic for three cents a unit.”

At a large public gathering, attended by the president, top officials and “celebrities” from various fields, a well-known comic personality lights into the administration and the media, accusing the one of malfeasance and the other of toadyism, and this, according to Steinberg and the *Times*, is not newsworthy. Is anyone expected to believe this?

The media buried Colbert’s routine because his comments, rather courageous considering the circumstances, spoke directly to their own role as accomplices of the administration. These are things that simply cannot be said in America.

One of the most dishonest and self-serving attacks on Colbert came from Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*. Cohen, in his May 4 column, first returns to the theme: Colbert’s comments were not funny. But why should Colbert have confined himself to amiable, good-natured “ribbing,” as Cohen and others would have preferred? He was sharing the dais with a criminal. He must have realized that he had the opportunity to speak for millions, to tell Bush what he should be told for once.

Cohen further attacks Colbert as “rude” and “insulting.” “Rudeness,” writes Cohen, “means taking advantage of the other person’s sense of decorum or tradition or civility that keeps that other person from striking back or, worse, rising in a huff and leaving. The other night, that person was George W. Bush.”

He continues, “Self-mockery can be funny. Mockery that is insulting is not. The sort of stuff that would get you punched in a bar can be said on a dais with impunity. This is why Colbert was more than rude. He was a bully.”

This is a remark worth considering. It is so preposterous that one

has to consider the social and intellectual process by which it could have made its way into print.

Bush, along with his associates, is guilty of launching an unprovoked war, illegal under international law, responsible for the death and mutilation of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Iraqis and Americans. He has helped pitch the world forward toward potential conflagrations of horrifying dimensions. As a personality, he is a weakling and a sadist. No one should forget his presiding over 152 executions in Texas, and his mockery of the plea of death-row inmate Karla Faye Tucker for clemency. “‘Please,’ Bush whimpered, imitating Tucker, his lips pursed in mock desperation, ‘don’t kill me.’ “

Standing reality on its head, Cohen, however, accuses *Colbert*, who merely hints at the methods of this administration, of being a “bully.” In making this comment, Cohen speaks for the privileged, profoundly self-satisfied media elite. The *Post* columnist responds with venom to any signs of political or cultural life going beyond the bounds of the official consensus; hence, his bitter attacks on Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* and now Colbert.

Cohen and his ilk are not journalists, they are courtiers, part of the administration’s entourage. This insulated media world, where intermarriage is common, where reporters “cover” the activities of their drinking buddies.... Cohen personifies this ignorant, cowardly milieu. He is the type that has made “pundit” into a dirty word.

Cohen is also covering up for his own complicity in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. After initial hesitations, he signed on enthusiastically to the war drive in February 2003, following Secretary of State Colin Powell’s appearance at the UN, during which Powell made entirely false allegations about the Iraqi regime. Cohen claimed at the time that the “evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations—some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail—had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn’t accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool—or possibly a Frenchman—could conclude otherwise.”

The columnist concluded, “If anyone had any doubt, Powell proved that it [Iraq] has defied international law—not to mention international norms concerning human rights—and virtually dared the United Nations to put up or shut up. There is no other hand. There is no choice.”

Many of the journalists in attendance at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner have similar track records. If they weren’t laughing at Colbert’s remarks, it’s no wonder.



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