

After Stephen Colbert's performance in 2006: White House press corps learns its lesson

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The decision by the White House Correspondents' Association to invite impersonator Rich Little to provide entertainment at its annual dinner in April captures something essential about the American media.

Last year's event was dominated by the appearance of comic Stephen Colbert, who skewered George W. Bush and his administration, as well as the Washington press corps. The latter, along with the White House, was not amused. Initially, the media attempted to conceal Colbert's comments from the public. His monologue received no mention from the *New York Times* in its first article and the *Washington Post* buried his commentary, leaving out the most pointed jokes. The performance only became widely known through a video that appeared on the Internet, which was downloaded millions of times within the first 48 hours.

At the dinner, Colbert, assuming his persona of a right-wing buffoon, ironically mocked Bush. Referring to the president, seated only a few feet to his right, he declaimed: "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?"

And: "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." The comic rejected the claims of those who were suggesting that a personnel shakeup at the White House was merely rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. "This administration is not sinking. This administration is *soaring*. If anything, they are rearranging the deck chairs on the Hindenburg!"

Colbert reserved one of his sharpest barbs for the White House press corps itself, whose leading lights were in attendance: "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.

"But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put them through a spell check and go home. 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!"

Having learned its lesson, the spineless White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) decided to avoid controversy

in 2007 by inviting the 68-year-old Little, whose impersonation of Richard Nixon in the early 1970s represented the height of his contribution to political humor.

Little dropped out of the limelight some time in the 1980s. He lives in Las Vegas and continues to tour his act. His schedule for January and February includes shows at the Suncoast Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas; the Soboba Casino in San Jacinto, California; the North Iowa Community Auditorium in Mason City, Iowa; Youkey Theatre at the Lakeland Center, Lakeland, Florida; the Cumberland County Civic Center Crown Theatre in Fayetteville, North Carolina; and the Central Auditorium in Findlay, Ohio.

On January 17, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* ran an article on Little's appearance at the correspondents' dinner. It noted that Little wouldn't "be mentioning Iraq or ratings when he addresses the White House Correspondents' Dinner April 21. Little said organizers of the event made it clear they don't want a repeat of last year's controversial appearance by Stephen Colbert, whose searing satire of President Bush and the White House press corps fell flat and apparently touched too many nerves. 'They got a lot of letters,' Little said Tuesday. 'I won't even mention the word "Iraq.'" Little, who hasn't been to the White House since he was a favorite of the Reagan administration, said he'll stick with his usual schtick—the impersonations of the past six presidents. 'They don't want anyone knocking the president. He's really over the coals right now, and he's worried about his legacy,' added Little, a longtime Las Vegas resident."

Steve Scully, a producer at C-Span and the current WHCA president, denied putting pressure on Little: "I cannot be more clear that we never mentioned Iraq, we never gave him any guidelines. The only thing we told him is that we want to follow the policy of the Gridiron Dinner, which is 'sing, don't burn.'"

After Little denied having even made the remarks to the Las Vegas newspaper, its reporter commented: "Let's go to the replay. Early in the interview, Little said, 'I won't even mention the word Iraq. It's not appropriate. You just want to be entertaining.... I won't do anything close to over the line.' He added, 'They said, from ...,' he paused, without finishing the sentence. 'They thought my approach was more appropriate for their kind of thing. They don't want Bill Maher or a comedian who's going to be biting and perhaps knock the president in any way.'"

In an interview with the *Washington Post's* Paul Farhi, Little made the same point: "One of the reasons they picked me is because I'm not controversial.... They did get some flak about the guy they had last year. I don't think they wanted someone political or controversial again."

Little seems a safe choice. On his personal web site, he includes an extended and heartfelt tribute to the late Ronald Reagan, which includes these gems: “He was unlike any celebrity I have ever known. When talking with him, you became unaware of the fact that you were talking with the President of the United States. The quickest way to become Ronald Reagan’s friend was to tell him a great joke. He would then come right back at you with a joke of his own. You could then tell him another joke, and he’d have another story to tell you. This could go on endlessly, even if there was a war on. ...

“He was nice to everyone and always appeared interested in anything you had to say. I think he was a great President because everyone liked him, even if they were opposed to his politics.... I will miss Ronald Reagan ... to me he was a lovable grandfather.”

Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* noted in a recent column that Little “was a guest on a radio show I hosted about 10 years ago, and even then, after he ran through about a dozen voices, I finally had to say, ‘Can you imitate anybody’s who’s alive?’ Mr. Little was not amused.”

Exemplifying the American media’s spirit of self-censorship and all-around philistinism, Scully remarked to the press, “My approach is to try to make it [the annual dinner] a comfortable venue that is enjoyable, funny and interesting.... But you don’t want to offend anyone.” According to *Editor & Publisher*, he “contends that Colbert’s appearance was a success and played no part in the choice of Little. ‘I think some of the criticism of Colbert was overblown,’ he said. ‘We didn’t hear anything from the White House.’ ... Scully added that getting the hottest, hippest entertainer is not always the best thing for the Washington crowd, whose participants span many different decades. ‘There are some people who think if you don’t know Stephen Colbert, you don’t get his brand of humor,’ Scully said. ‘You want someone who appeals to the [right-wing columnist] Bob Novaks and the bloggers of the world.’” In another comment, Scully suggested that the correspondents didn’t want to make Bush a “political piñata.”

No one with a brain in his or her head will believe that the WHCA didn’t hear from the White House about Colbert’s performance, directly or indirectly. Bush was obviously livid, as was his wife. One top Bush aide was quoted as saying, “Colbert crossed the line.” Several aides and supporters walked out before the comic had finished.

Ron Hutcheson, a McClatchy Newspapers reporter and former correspondents’ association president, acknowledged that Colbert’s impact had played a role in the choice of Little. “It is certainly a safe choice, which might be nice,” he said. “My personal feeling is that this [the selection of Little] is about ENOUGH.... We don’t need to have a blogfest and a partisan slugfest after the dinner. We don’t need that.”

What can one say? The media and political establishment is impervious to the sentiments of the population. The war in Iraq is a disaster, the administration’s policies have been rejected by the population, Bush is widely despised. Colbert spoke for millions last year, telling the president of the United States what a scoundrel he was.

The media, on the other hand, lives and breathes in Bush’s universe. They felt Colbert had been too harsh, unfair, bullying.

In the case of the White House correspondents, they literally breathe the same air. These are individuals who fly on Air Force One, who joke around with Bush and his cohorts, whose careers depend on their ability to be intimate with the president. They may be Republicans or

Democrats, it hardly matters, but they are part of Washington’s well-heeled, incestuous in-crowd.

In addition to Scully, who worked as a teenager on Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign, the WHCA includes among its officers Ann Compton of ABC News (she serves as the organization’s vice president). Her official biography reveals that Compton “is now covering a sixth President for ABC News in a career that has taken her to the White House, Capitol Hill and through seven presidential campaigns. She is the National correspondent for ABC News Radio, based [in] Washington, DC. On September 11, 2001, Ms. Compton was the only broadcast reporter allowed to remain onboard Air Force One during the dramatic hours when President Bush was unable to return to Washington.”

Another WHCA officer, its treasurer, is Jennifer Loven of Associated Press. Her husband, Roger Ballentine, was a senior adviser to the John Kerry campaign in 2004 and is currently president of Green Strategies Inc, an environmental lobbying firm. Ballentine was a senior member of the Clinton White House staff, serving as chairman of the White House Climate Change Task Force and deputy assistant to the president for Environmental Initiatives. Prior to being named deputy assistant to the president, Ballentine was special assistant to the president for Legislative Affairs, where he focused on energy and environment issues.

WHCA secretary Peter Maer of “CBS News”, according to the network’s biography, “has covered the White House since 1986.... A frequent flyer on Air Force One, Maer has traveled to nearly 40 countries and every State of the Union with Presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter.”

WHCA board member Steve Holland of Reuters was cited in a *USA Today* article in 2001 on Bush’s “Western White House” in Crawford, Texas. “Holland, who started covering the White House when Bush’s father was in charge, is wistful when he recalls cooler summer sojourns in Kennebunkport, Maine. ‘If only he had his father’s preference for vacation spots,’ Holland says. Despite fond memories of Kennebunkport and President Bill Clinton’s trips to chic Jackson Hole, Wyo. ... and Martha’s Vineyard, Mass., Holland says he’s content at the Western White House.”

It comes as no surprise that these people were made unhappy by the performance of Colbert, who committed the fatal error of telling certain elementary, indisputable truths about the Bush administration, truths which the mass media knows but never repeats. By their ridiculous actions, the members of the White House press corps only confirm the point the comic was making about their toadying. Indeed, by bending over backward *so far* with their choice of the anodyne, Reagan-loving, all-but-forgotten Little, the White House correspondents have demonstrated their subservience and cowardice more graphically than Colbert could possibly have done.



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