

Social satirist George Carlin dead at 71

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American comedian George Carlin, an acerbic commentator on life and at times a sharp social satirist, died June 22 in Santa Monica, California at the age of 71. His was a critical voice in American public life.

Carlin was born in Morningside Heights in Manhattan; his mother was a secretary, his father worked as an advertising manager for the *New York Sun*. “I used to be an Irish Catholic,” he would tell audiences. He explained on another occasion that he’d been a Catholic “until I reached the age of reason.”

Carlin quit high school at 14 and later joined the Air Force. Endowed with an extraordinary gift of gab, he became a disc jockey at a radio station in Louisiana near the base where he was stationed. Carlin was discharged from the air force as an “unproductive airman” in 1957. He teamed up with Jack Burns in 1959, and the pair headed for California in 1960.

He began his comedy career as a solo act in the mid-1960s, appearing dozens of times on programs such as the “Ed Sullivan Show” and “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson. Carlin enjoyed enormous mainstream success, but his anti-establishment side was chafing. Carlin was influenced by famed comic Lenny Bruce and was supposedly present at the latter’s arrest in 1962 in Chicago for obscenity. Speaking of his success in the 1960s, Carlin later told an interviewer that “I was a traitor, in so many words. I was living a lie.”

Swept up by the radicalized times, Carlin changed his image and the contents of his act in 1970, and never looked back. After some career setbacks as a result of his new material, he developed a wide following with his album “FM & AM” in 1972. A portion of his longer routine, “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television,” i.e., ‘obscene’ words, appeared on that album. Carlin was arrested in Milwaukee in 1972 for performing the routine, which is an extended and sometimes lyrical consideration of “filthy words.”

When the routine was broadcast on WBAI in New York in 1973, the radio station was cited by the Federal Communications Commission. The US Supreme Court eventually ruled that the material was “indecent but not obscene,” and that the government could ban such broadcasts during hours when children were likely to be listening.

The scatological element in Carlin’s routines could be overdone, and often was, but there was more to his comedy than that.

To give him credit, the comedian had an extraordinary command of words and a serious attitude toward language and its misuse, especially by those with power and money. He is one of those comics, and there are not too many around at present, whose material can be read and appreciated.

Carlin expressed nothing but contempt for official political life and religion. His humor had a Swiftian, mordant quality at its best. For example, in the routine, “Legal Murder Once a Month,” in which he suggests that killing is not one of those things that should be left up to the state. “I believe the killing of human beings is just one more function of government that needs to be privatized.”

After outlining his “Legal Murder Once a Month” plan, he continues: “I want you to know there’s nothing in the Constitution to prevent any of this. The state doesn’t actually oppose murder, it simply objects to those who go into business for themselves. When it comes to the taking of human life, the federal government doesn’t want free-lance competition.”

Or consider “The American Businessman’s Ten Steps to Product Development”: “1. Can I cut corners in the design? 2. Can it be shoddily built? 3. Can I use cheap materials? 4. Will it create hazards for my workers? 5. Will it harm the environment? 6. Can I evade the safety laws? 7. Will children die from it? 8. Can I overprice it? 9. Can it be falsely advertised? 10. Will it force smaller competitors out of business?”

“Excellent. Let’s get busy.”

In his “Golf Courses for the Homeless,” Carlin commented: “When the United States is not invading some sovereign nation—or setting it on fire from the air, which is more fun for our simple-minded pilots—we’re usually busy ‘declaring war’ on something here at home,” i.e. “a war on crime, a war on poverty, a war on litter, a war on cancer.” There’s no war on homelessness, “because there’s no money in it.”

Carlin proposes: “I know just the place to build housing for the homeless: golf courses. It’s perfect. Plenty of good land in nice neighborhoods that is currently being squandered on a mindless activity engaged in by white, well-to-do business criminals who use the game to get together so they can make deals to carve this country up a little finer among themselves.”

The comedian declares his own war in particular on euphemisms: “I don’t like euphemistic language, words that shade the truth. American English is packed with euphemism, because Americans have trouble dealing with reality, and in order to shield themselves from it they use soft language. And it gets worse with every generation.”

As an example, Carlin describes the evolution of that “condition in combat that occurs when a soldier is completely stressed out and is on the verge of nervous collapse.” In World War I, he points out, the condition was known as “shell shock. Simple, honest direct language. Two syllables.”

By the time of World War II, it was called “battle fatigue.” “Doesn’t seem to hurt as much. ‘Fatigue’ is a nicer word than

‘shock.’” During the Korean War, the authorities came up with the expression, “operational exhaustion.” Carlin comments: “The phrase was up to eight syllables now, and any last traces of humanity had been completely squeezed out of it. It was absolutely sterile: operational exhaustion. Like something that could happen to your car.”

Then, he says, “we got into Vietnam, and thanks to the deceptions surrounding that war, it’s no surprise that the very same condition was referred to as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder.’ ... I’ll bet if they had still been calling it ‘shell shock,’ some of those Vietnam veterans might have received the attention they needed.” The comic describes the ‘New Language’ as the ‘language that takes the life out of life.’

Carlin lists some of the other euphemisms that have entered the language during his lifetime, among them: “false teeth=dental appliances,” “used cars=previously owned vehicles,” “riot=civil disorder,” “strike=job action,” “drug addiction=substance abuse,” “gambling joint=gaming resort,” “wife beating=domestic violence” and so on.

He has a lovely time with language in general, and its oddities. For example, in this routine on the lingo used in airport announcements. “To begin their boarding process, the airline announces they will **preboard** certain passengers. And I wonder, How can that be? How can people board before they board?” Later: “I’m told to get *on* the plane. ... And I think for a moment: ‘On the plane? No, my friends, not me. I’m not getting *on* the plane; I’m getting *in* the plane. Let Evil Knievel get *on* the plane, I’ll be sitting inside one of those little chairs. It seems less windy to me.’

“Then they mention it’s a **nonstop flight**. Well, I must say I don’t care for that sort of thing. Call me old-fashioned, but I insist that my flight stop. Preferably at an airport.”

And then there’s the inevitable safety lecture, which contains this phrase, “In the unlikely event of a **water landing**...” A water landing! Am I mistaken, or does this sound somewhat similar to ‘crashing into the ocean?’”

Carlin takes a look at expressions “we take for granted. We use them all the time, yet never examine them carefully.”

For example, “**Legally drunk**. Well, if it’s legal what’s the problem? ‘Leave me alone, officer, I’m legally drunk.’”

Or, “**It’s the quiet ones you gotta watch**. Every time I see a television news story about a mass murderer, the guy’s neighbor always says, ‘Well, he was very quiet.’ And someone I’m with says, ‘It’s the quiet ones you gotta watch.’ ... Suppose you’re in a bar, and one guy is sitting over on the side, reading a book, not bothering anybody. And another guy is standing up at the front, bangin’ a machete on the bar, screaming, ‘I’m gonna kill the next motherfucker who pisses me off!’ Who you gonna watch?”

The subject of the Catholic Church was a favorite. “And regarding the Catholics, when I hear that the Pope and some of his ‘holy’ friends have experienced their first pregnancies and labor pains, and raised a couple of children on minimum wage, I’ll be glad to hear what they have to say about abortion.”

The comic was scathing on the subject of George W. Bush, whom he referred to as “Governor Bush,” since that was the last position to which he had been “legally elected.” And national

security and the “war on terror.” Carlin told his audience, “As far as I’m concerned, all of this airport security—the cameras, the questions, the screenings, the searches—is just one more way of reducing your liberty and reminding you that they can fuck with you anytime they want—as long as you’re willing to put up with it. Which means, of course, anytime they want. Because that’s the way Americans are now. They’re always willing to trade away a little of their freedom in exchange for the feeling—the illusion—of security.”

The last comment reveals Carlin’s Achilles heel, his misanthropy, which is not unconnected to several decades of reaction and political quiescence. He pretended to be amused by the “human game [which] was up a long time ago (when the high priests and the traders took over)” and “the slow circling of the drain by a once promising species.”

On MSNBC in October 2007, he commented, “This country’s finished,” and in the preface to a new collection of his writings, he excoriated “the sappy, ever-more-desperate belief in this country that there is some sort of ‘American Dream,’ which has merely been misplaced. The decay and disintegration of this culture is astonishingly amusing if you are emotionally detached from it.” Of course, as his best performances indicated, hardly anyone was less “emotionally detached from” the process in question.

His last published book, nicely entitled “When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?,” begins with a piece (or poem), “A Modern Man,” which makes use of countless turn-of-the-21st-century clichés to make its point. One portion of it goes:

“I’m in the moment, on the edge,
over the top, but under the radar.

A high-concept, low-profile,
medium-range ballistic missionary.

A street-wise smart bomb.
A top-gun bottom-feeder.

I wear power ties, I tell power lies,
I take power naps, I run victory laps.

I’m a totally ongoing, big-foot, slam-dunk
rainmaker with a pro-active outreach.

A raging workaholic, a working rageaholic;
out of rehab and in denial.”

Carlin’s passing deserves to be noticed.



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