

Back in the fold: Comic Stephen Colbert in Baghdad

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Its unsurprising character does not make comic Stephen Colbert's trip to Iraq and his solidarizing himself with the US war effort any less disgraceful.

Colbert, whose *Colbert Report* (with a silent "t" in "Report") on the Comedy Central cable channel has a considerable following among students and young people, taped four episodes of his nightly show in Baghdad June 8-11 before an audience of American military personnel.

In the course of the programs, he interviewed top US military commanders and Iraq's deputy prime minister and aired "shout-outs" from President Barack Obama, former presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Vice President Joe Biden, senators John McCain of Arizona and Jim Webb of Virginia, and Alaska's governor, Sarah Palin. The entertainment industry hierarchy was represented by actor Tom Hanks, who joined Colbert in a segment taped prior to the Baghdad visit.

This extraordinarily top-heavy establishment presence helps explain the generally leaden character of the shows. Unavoidably, given the personalities involved and the need to sanitize the criminal US enterprise in Iraq, Colbert's programs had the embalmed and stage-managed feel of so much of the rest of official American political life.

Three years ago, in late April 2006, Colbert aroused the ire of the Republican Party and numerous media pundits with his skewering of then-President George W. Bush at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. Effectively on that occasion, Colbert offered his impersonation of a pompous, right-wing blowhard, calling on Bush 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."

With the president seated only a few feet to his right, Colbert paid slashing mock tribute to 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."

Bush and his entourage were livid. Leading media outlets, as the WSWWS pointed out at the time, [Bush, US media respond to Stephen Colbert's comic assault: "We are not amused"], were also "not amused" by Colbert's performance.

The *New York Times* tried to ignore Colbert's presence, not mentioning his name in its initial coverage of the event. The *Washington Post*, the Associated Press and others largely followed suit. However, thanks to a widely watched video of the event, word of Colbert's satirical attack spread, and the media then fell back to its second line of defense—the comic was either "not funny," or, worse, he had been "insulting" or, in the words of the *Post*'s resident philistine, columnist Richard Cohen, a "bully."

Some water has flowed under the bridge since 2006. Massive repression and ethnic cleansing carried out by the US military and its local agents have led to a fragile partial stabilization of the situation in Iraq. More significantly, perhaps, the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 largely satisfied upper-middle-class layers in the media and the entertainment industry whose objections to Bush had been of a superficial and essentially "cultural" character. The intervention in Iraq is now considered a "success" by these circles and the brutal Afghanistan conflict "the good war."

A president who can utter a sentence without garbling it, whose skin color guarantees his supposedly advanced views on various racial and gender questions, who has brought into his administration a more sophisticated, urban crowd...who could fail to be pleased by that?

At any rate, Colbert, whose blowhard persona had been wearing a little thin in the recent period, took himself off to Iraq, because, as he semi-mockingly explained on his first show for the troops, "I thought the whole Iraq thing was over.... I haven't seen any news stories in months."

The Pentagon clearly took Colbert's measure some time ago—his program airs twice nightly on the American Forces Network—and felt it had nothing to fear from his presence.

The highlight of the first program, after Colbert's mock backstage abduction by a black-clad SWAT team and flight to an unknown destination, was an appearance by Gen. Ray Odierno, commanding general of the Multi-National Force-Iraq

and one of the architect's of the American military's "surge" in 2007.

Odierno, along with later guest Lt. Gen. Charles H. Jacoby Jr., another top US commander in Iraq, was given a platform to repeat Washington's lies about "progress in security" and the American effort to bring "democracy" to the Middle Eastern nation. This was simply disgusting. Assuming the best—that Colbert has chosen to remain ignorant about the realities of the neo-colonial intervention in Iraq—he was nonetheless interviewing and clowning around with leading military thugs and war criminals.

The US-led occupation has been a human catastrophe for the Iraqi people, with as many as 1 million dead and millions forced into internal or external exile, and tens of thousands of American men and women killed or wounded as well. This infamous war, for much of the world's population, will be eternally identified with such names as Abu Ghraib, Haditha and Fallujah—in other words, with torture, atrocity and massacre. Millions and millions of people across the globe understand what the invasion was really about: the seizure of Iraq's vast oil supplies. The word "oil" was never once uttered by the complacent Mr. Colbert.

The comic praised the US military, "whatever the rights or wrongs," for "turning chaos" into order in Iraq and declared a US "victory" in the conflict. Whether he meant it to be a satirical moment or not, a reference perhaps to the proclamation by anti-war forces in the 1960s that the Vietnam War was over and the troops should be brought home, Colbert's trumpeting about American victory brought cheers from the pumped-up crowd. Unpleasantly, his caricature of a right-wing demagogue was finding a genuine response.

After a comment by Odierno to the effect that the goal of American forces was to bring "long-term stability" to Iraq, Colbert asked whether, after that, the military could do the same in the US. Not funny. In fact, sinister.

The programs went on and on: Obama ordered Odierno to shave Colbert's head, military-style; in the only genuinely comic bit, Colbert played his pampered, self-important self undergoing army basic training; he offered a few cheap jokes about the war itself: "Iraq, the country so nice we invaded it twice" and tasteless, triumphalist references to Saddam Hussein's brutal fate; in the only vaguely critical note—inevitably—Colbert debated with himself over gays in the military; he carried out a lifeless, politically pointed conversation with two soldiers, one an Arab-American translator, the other, a female; Hanks and Colbert performed an extended and unamusing bit about USO packages, etc.

At one point, after a deliberately potted history of Iraqi civilization, Colbert referred, apparently with a straight face, to "Iraq's new democracy" and Iraqi citizens' "full control of their cities...more than you can say for Detroit."

Colbert's interview with Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh was another low point. Saleh is a longtime member of the

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, a party consistently supported and financed by the CIA. Saleh functioned for 10 years in Washington as the PUK and Kurdistan Regional Government representative to the US.

The deputy prime minister paid fulsome tribute, even embarrassing Colbert, to the "wonderful US military" that had "saved us from tyranny" and "helped us defeat Al Qaeda and the terrorists."

Colbert may have thought with his Iraq trip he could pay tribute to the troops in some "politically neutral" fashion, avoid the thornier issues of the war's motives and outshine the generally dull-witted military brass. However, one can't play games with such questions. The comic's light-mindedness and unseriousness render him vulnerable to the manipulations of the far more serious political and military establishment.

Colbert's star is clearly in the ascendancy. The appearances of Bush senior and junior suggest that much, if not all, is forgiven for the 2006 lambasting. Back in the fold, if he ever left it, Colbert made the cover of *Newsweek* magazine last week and performed the task, comically, of guest editor.

The same media that blasted him three years ago for his "rude" and "offensive" assault on Bush has applauded his Iraq tour. The *Los Angeles Times* even felt called on to congratulate Colbert in an editorial for "bringing together Comedy Central's largely liberal audience, the military, media and conservative politicians to focus attention on the 130,000-plus American troops still fighting a war we started."

Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* echoed the comment, observing that "Mr. Obama and former presidents humored Comedy Central by taping tongue-in-cheek messages to the troops: they seized the opportunity to participate in a government-sanctioned tribute alongside a comedian popular with people who despise conventional politics and government-sanctioned entertainment."

Unhappily, in the process, Colbert showed his all-too "conventional" and "government-sanctioned" colors.



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