

# Stewart/Colbert rally preaches compromise and complacency

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On Saturday, US comedic television hosts Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert organized a demonstration that drew over 200,000 under the slogan “Rally for Sanity.”

Participants included many young people, along with families and retirees. The general mood was one of hostility toward the right wing, and the rally was in part organized in response to one held by Fox television host Glenn Beck in August. The event was heavily promoted by liberal supporters of Obama, including the Huffington Post, which spent \$250,000 to bus people in.

Many of those participating were drawn from relatively insulated layers of the middle class for whom the rally’s central theme—that there is not much to be angry about—resonated, at least to some extent. However, insofar as Stewart and Colbert are associated with a certain antiestablishment sentiment, the demonstration attracted broader layers.

The widespread support that Stewart and Colbert have among young people in particular is an indication of the general disillusionment with the political system and the mass media. One cannot think of a political figure who could draw a similar attendance, as there is no one in either party that has a significant base of support. At a rally on Sunday in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, Obama was greeted by 5,000 empty seats in a stadium intended to seat 13,000. The Stewart/Colbert rally was also about three times larger than the Beck rally organized in August.

Stewart and Colbert attempted to portray their event as “nonpartisan” and the comedians are not directly political figures. However, there was nevertheless a definite political line underlying it: support for the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

Under conditions in which the majority of the

American population is increasingly disillusioned by the pro-corporate and pro-war policies of Obama and the entire political establishment, the basic theme of the event was the need for a political consensus between the two parties in Washington and their allies in the media.

This generally corresponds with the aims of the Obama administration itself. Indeed, at the end of a generally favorable episode-long interview with Obama on Stewart’s “Daily Show” three days before the rally, the US president gave his endorsement to the weekend event, saying he wished it had been held two years ago.

Stewart spoke about his own conceptions behind the event in his closing remarks on Saturday. He expressed the hope that behind every political conflict is some sort of misunderstanding that can be resolved through reasoned discussion. “We can have animus and not be enemies,” he said.

Stewart directed his main criticisms against the media, repeating his analysis that the problem is that media pundits are too partisan and extreme, that they inflate problems and hinder resolutions. “The country’s 24-hour politico pundit perpetual panic conflictanator did not cause our problems, but its existence has made solving them that much harder... If we amplify everything, we hear nothing,” he complained.

If drivers with different political views and backgrounds can merge in an orderly fashion in a traffic jam, Stewart said, then certainly everyone in Washington DC should be able to work together to get things done.

This is first of all an utterly false portrayal of the real state of affairs in the American media and political system. The mudslinging among media pundits is intended more to distract from the real problems facing millions of people and to draw attention away from the

fact that the political establishment as a whole is in basic agreement on all fundamental issues.

At the same time, Stewart's "politics of the golden mean" is a facile one, devoid of any understanding of the social forces driving politics, including the significant corporate financing behind the promotion of an extreme right-wing movement in the United States. Stewart expresses the attitude of the relatively comfortable middle-class supporters of the Democratic Party who are constantly trying to reach some sort of accommodation with the right.

The basic sentiment that Stewart sought to cultivate was one of complacency. The rally was called in the midst of the greatest economic crisis in generations, but there was absolutely no mention—either before or during the event—of the desperate situation facing millions of people. There was nothing about the ongoing wars carried out by both political parties that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands. There was no hint of the unprecedented attack on democratic rights in the United States.

According to Stewart's analysis, the immense divisions that are emerging in American society are little more than a media creation. The outlook is in fact preposterous.

There was also an ugly element to the rally, a deliberate attempt in particular to blackguard and delegitimize any left-wing opposition to the policies of the ruling class. On a number of occasions, Stewart lumped together left-wing opponents of Obama with the extreme right, declaring, "Why would you work with Marxists actively subverting our constitution? Or racists and homophobes who see no one's humanity but their own?"

The attempt to equate socialists with racists and homophobes is a deliberate attempt to render illegitimate any argument that the political system is dictated by the interests of the corporate and financial elite—a sentiment in fact shared by millions of people.

The call for all Americans to come together as one was combined with a nationalist and at time jingoist subtext to the entire demonstration, beginning with the singing of the national anthem by US military veterans. Later, Stewart and Colbert covered themselves in American flags, and Stewart accompanied musician Jeff Tweedy to sing that America "is the greatest, strongest country in the world. There is no one more

American than we."

While Stewart and Colbert have at times in the past leveled some sharp barbs at the political establishment, the media, and the corporate elite, their criticisms have generally been of a limited and superficial character. Their shows have become fixtures of the same political system that they have at times scorned. All manner of politicians—including the president himself—have allowed themselves to be interviewed. Last year, Colbert was given access to top military figures as part of a trip to Iraq, during which he whitewashed the disaster inflicted on that country by the US government.

While there were no doubt many people in attendance this past weekend who looked to the demonstration as a way of expressing their opposition to the direction of US policy, nothing of the sort was provided by Stewart and Colbert.



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