

“Daily Show” host Jon Stewart steps down

David Walsh
10 August 2015

On August 6, after sixteen years, comic Jon Stewart hosted his final episode of “The Daily Show,” the mock news program on cable channel Comedy Central.

The final program was of a piece with the other more than 2,500 on which Stewart appeared: a few jabs at the political establishment combined with a great heap of self-congratulation and self-satisfaction.

On last Thursday’s show, many of the comic pseudo-commentators and journalists who had appeared on Stewart’s program during its lengthy run made brief appearances, including Steve Carell, Lewis Black, Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Ed Helms, Rob Corddry, Larry Wilmore, Olivia Munn, Aasif Mandvi, Rob Riggle and others.

In video clips, an assortment of politicians and newscasters bid farewell to Stewart, making fake-unfriendly comments in some cases. These included Democratic Party presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, Senators John McCain and Charles Schumer, Rep. Charles Rangel, Secretary of State John Kerry, Gov. Chris Christie, Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly and CNN’s Wolf Blitzer. Bruce Springsteen and his band were on hand to perform two numbers to close the final show.

The American media has treated Stewart’s departure as a major political or cultural event. The *New York Times*, for example, lavished praise on the “Daily Show” host in an article headlined “Jon Stewart Signs Off From ‘Daily Show’ With Wit and Sincerity.” Stewart, the *Times* suggested, had devoted himself to “taking satirical aim at the hypocrisy of politics and the fatuousness of the news media,” while his farewell broadcast “mixed wry parting shots with earnest displays of emotion and with a passionate speech urging his audience not to accept falsehoods and misinformation in their lives.”

Serious doubts ought to arise, to begin with, about Stewart’s reputation as a fearless speaker of the truth, a fierce critic of both parties in Washington, a caustic and thoughtful commentator on American life, etc. both by the friendly greetings from the likes of Clinton, McCain, Kerry and Schumer and the treatment of his quitting the “Daily Show” by the major media outlets. No one representing a serious threat to the status quo would elicit that kind of response.

In some of the media comments one finds a certain note of concern. For sixteen, often turbulent years, Stewart performed a specific and useful function. In the face of a right-wing effort to impeach a president of the United States, a hijacked national

election, major terrorist attacks, various brutal, neo-colonial invasions in the name of the “war on terror,” sustained attacks on democratic rights and the growth of unprecedented social inequality, the *Daily Show* host presented himself as the sardonic, bemused voice of sanity in a “world [that] has gone mad.”

As the *Daily Show* evolved and attracted a specific, mostly youthful audience, Stewart developed a definite approach to the news and contemporary politics, effectively conveyed through commentary, graphics and video.

This approach involved the use of a specific type of comic-ideological apparatus: a serious or even tragic incident went in one end of the Stewart-“Daily Show” machine and was broken up into a series of relatively juvenile gags. Fun was made at the expense of all those involved. The host added looks of amazement, meaningful silences and a healthy dose of mugging. Absurdist photo montages and headlines were thrown in, and—at the end of four, five or six minutes—the incident emerged at the other end, stripped of its seriousness or significance, any possible outrage or desire to protest on the part of the viewer having been tamped down or entirely dissipated.

As though all the big events of the day were poured into a meat grinder that reduced and equalized them into little bits, making the result digestible and palatable to a middle class audience and conveying one overriding message: Despite appearances to the contrary, none of this should disturb you terribly much. If we were all simply left alone by the “alarmists” and “crazies,” we would be fine.

Whether it was the illegal assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen by a US drone-fired missile, the Israeli invasion of Gaza, the exposure of US government criminality by WikiLeaks, the revelation that President Barack Obama presided over sessions where “kill lists” were drawn up, Stewart’s modus operandi remained essentially the same.

That Stewart was on the critical or “left” side of some of these issues only underscores the point. Whether he was sincere or merely sensitive to the opinions of his audience, for example, the “Daily Show” host presented himself as appalled by the “kill lists” story. But he made so light of this brazen illegality, it hardly mattered in the end.

“Please tell me,” Stewart implored, that “people are upset about this.” It turned out that the politicians were troubled only

by the fact that Obama's role had come to light, and as far as a figure like Sen. McCain was concerned, the disclosure made the president "look good!"

Stewart, again, was ironically appalled: "Here's a leak that would make him [Obama] look good: Ooh, the president has a secret program to answer every child's letter to Santa Claus. The president keeps a classified list of things he loves about his family. I just heard from an anonymous source that the president fights crime at night as Batman."

The dates of Stewart's tenure at the "Daily Show" are politically suggestive. He came into his own, so to speak, along with a number of other liberal or left-liberal media and online critics—such as MoveOn, *Daily Kos*, the *Huffington Post*, Michael Moore, *The Onion*, Rachel Maddow, Bill Maher, Amy Goodman and *Democracy Now!*, *Air America* and Al Franken, and others—under the Bush administration.

This social layer was frustrated and disappointed by the "cautious" and spineless Democratic campaigns in 2000 and 2004, including the Gore camp's non-response to the stolen election in 2000, and wanted a more assertive party and also one more receptive to the needs of the upper- middle class affirmative action and identity politics crowd.

Behind them stood significant layers of the ruling elite who were unhappy with the Bush administration's heavy-handed and blundering unilateralism around the globe, the crassness of its connections to corporate criminality, and Bush's own obvious stupidity and lack of savoir faire. Major corporate and financial interests felt a tactical (and "cultural") shift was in order, and Barack Obama was forthwith called from the political "vast deep" and turned into presidential material. Stewart and his media ilk were facilitators in this process.

Obama appeared seven times on Stewart's program, two of them while he was in the White House. During his final visit to the "Daily Show," Obama quipped, "I can't believe that you're leaving before me," and ended the interview by shaking Stewart's hand and telling him, "You've been a great gift to the country."

Well, in any case, a "great gift" to the *Obama administration*, and not simply, it turns out, as a result of Stewart's conformist social outlook. In late July, *Politico* reported that the talk show host "slipped unnoticed into the White House in the midst of the October 2011 budget fight, summoned to an Oval Office coffee with President Barack Obama," and that in February 2014, "Obama again requested Stewart make the trip from Manhattan to the White House, this time for a midmorning visit hours before the president would go before television cameras to warn Russia that 'there will be costs' if it made any further military intervention in Ukraine."

Politico notes: "In Stewart's first show after his February 2014 visit to the White House, he picked up on the Russia-Ukraine news that Obama had spoken about in the press briefing room a few hours after their private chat. In a segment titled 'It's a Vlad, Vlad, Vlad, Vlad World,' Stewart giggled

as he displayed a picture of the shirtless Russian leader—'Heil Titler,' he joked. Then he showed a video of Vladimir Putin at the Winter Olympics in Sochi and wondered if he was 'even paying attention at the Olympics?... Or did you consider the parade of nations a browsing opportunity?'"

Stewart here was openly and reprehensibly lining up with and aiding the cause of US militarism and aggression, as well as siding with a Ukrainian regime, installed by the Western powers, littered with fascists and anti-Semites. No small matter.

In other instances too, Stewart's mask fell away, although not the smirking comic tone, and the political axe he had to grind came to the forefront. The talk show host could hardly contain his hostility to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

On November 30, 2010, the "Daily Show" featured an extended segment dedicated to downplaying the explosive character of the WikiLeaks material, sophomorically mocking Assange's name and generally making light of revelations that had produced a major crisis for US imperialist diplomacy.

Stewart pontificated: "Transparency is a good thing, government wrongdoing should be ferreted out. Although, just because something is secret doesn't necessarily mean it's nefarious." In sum, "an interesting yet less explosive and less than searing indictment." Stewart came to function as a peculiar sort of political troubleshooter, calming potentially troubled waters.

Stewart's woeful efforts are not a personal failing. He is the product of a generation and a social class. Coming of age in suburbia in the Reagan years, Stewart, who expressed a vague interest in Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs in high school, drifted along with many others toward hedonism, social indifference and self-centeredness. Able to earn a living by his wits without too much difficulty, Stewart never found that much to complain about, other than the blatant idiocies of politicians and government officials, which both offended him and threatened the stability of his social milieu.

For his services, Stewart has been well compensated. He retired as US television's highest-paid late-night personality, earning somewhere between \$25 and \$30 million, according to TV Guide's annual salary report. He and his producers are all multi-millionaires.



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