

“Late Show” debut: After Colbert drops the satire, what’s left?

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During his first week as host of CBS’s “The Late Show,” the late-night talk and variety show previously hosted by David Letterman, comic Stephen Colbert exhibited the conventional and conservative outlook that have become increasingly obvious in recent years.

In assuming the role of host of “The Late Show,” Colbert is taking up an important position in the 24-hour cycle through which the political and media establishment creates official “public opinion” in America. That Colbert understands this function well is indicated by the reaction from the media, which has generally praised his initial episodes. The *New York Times*, for example, wrote, “This show may not completely know what it is yet, but it knows exactly who its host is: a smart, curious, playful entertainer who’s delighted to be there.”

Colbert rose to prominence as a critic and satirist under the Bush administration. After initially participating in Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show” on Comedy Central, in 2005 Colbert created the spin-off, “The Colbert Report,” with the two shows airing back-to-back for the next nine years. Colbert adopted the persona of a bombastic conservative news pundit, mocking the reactionary, nationalist views of Fox News figures such as Bill O’Reilly.

He gained a broader following as the result of his widely popular monologue at the 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner, in which he skillfully flayed the Bush administration and the subservient media. Colbert attracted an audience among predominantly middle class youth disillusioned with the current political setup, while also channeling the sentiments of a section of the establishment that had tactical and differences with Bush and his cohorts, especially on the so-called “social issues” such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 quickly exposed the fact that Colbert, Stewart and other sometime critics of the Bush administration were not opponents of the general economic and political setup, and had little concern for the problems of the mass of working people.

After throwing his support behind the Obama campaign, Colbert deepened his integration into official politics, gradually abandoning the critical tone of his commentary. Within months of Obama’s inauguration, Colbert aired a series of episodes of “The Colbert Report” from Baghdad in which he expressed support for the neocolonial Iraq war. A year later, he hosted a “Rally for Sanity” with Stewart, in which the two sought to direct their audience back to official politics.

The comedic element of both Colbert and Stewart suffered tremendously during this period, as their acts became increasingly tired and unfunny. It became increasingly unclear how Colbert’s own positions differed from those of his right-wing persona.

With the launching of “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,” Colbert has essentially cast off the satirical element entirely, while solidifying his role as a pro-Democratic Party media personality. In the process, he has freed himself from any lingering association with political opposition.

This was very much on view during Colbert’s first week. He conducted two political interviews, one with Vice President Joe Biden and the other with former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who is pursuing the 2016 Republican Party presidential nomination. Colbert was fawning toward both the Democratic Vice President and the Republican contender.

Biden’s appearance was stage-managed to promote his potential campaign for the Democratic nomination. Colbert sought to present the veteran Democrat as a

man of compassion and humility. Biden clearly appreciated this treatment, at one point calling Colbert “old buddy.”

In lieu of any discussion of the record of the Obama administration—including endless war, the assault on basic democratic rights and the greatest transfer of wealth to the rich in US history—Colbert focused the conversation on the recent death of Biden’s son Beau, declaring, “You’re a man of substance. People know that you have experienced tragedies in your life and we are inspired by the way that you have responded to those.”

The two then bonded over their shared Irish Catholic heritage, with Biden quoting his mother as often saying, “Remember, nobody is better than you. But you’re better than nobody. Everybody’s equal.” Colbert replied, “Well, you know, there’s another person who said that, and that’s Thomas Jefferson. And this is why I think people want you to run for president.”

Colbert closed the interview by saying, “I think we’d all be very happy if you did run. And if you don’t, I know that your service to the country is something we should all salute. So thank you so much.”

The Jeb Bush interview was designed to portray this right-wing figure as a political moderate, in contrast to Donald Trump as well as the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party. Colbert ignored Bush’s own political biography, as well as the criminal record of his family. Bush’s father, George H.W. Bush, was the former head of the CIA and, as president, oversaw the first Gulf War in 1991. Bush’s brother, George W. Bush, presided over the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan and the launching of the so-called “war on terror,” which has established the framework of a police state in the US. As governor of Florida, Jeb Bush played a key role in the hijacking of the 2000 presidential election in favor of his brother, and also enacted an array of reactionary social measures.

As is his wont, Colbert sought to promote the idea that the problem with American politics is partisanship, obscuring the reality that both parties represent the interests of big business and agree on all fundamental issues. When Bush declared, “We have to restore a degree of civility” to politics in Washington, Colbert responded, “There is a non-zero chance that I would vote for you. You seem like a very reasonable guy who

believes that governing is something that the government should do.”

The celebrities Colbert has hosted so far include George Clooney (a member of the Council on Foreign Relations) and Scarlett Johansson, both firm backers of the Democratic Party. He has also interviewed Tesla CEO Elon Musk and Uber CEO Travis Kalanick, two newly-minted billionaires whose self-satisfaction was nearly matched by Colbert’s.

Colbert, currently worth an estimated \$45 million, has been paid well for his efforts to keep social discontent within safe official channels. He is replacing David Letterman, one of the highest-paid late night hosts in history, whose net worth exceeds \$400 million. Colbert decided to take a pay cut for “The Late Show,” going from a \$6 million salary at Comedy Central to a mere \$4.6 million at CBS for the next three years.

Making the transition to network television, with nearly triple the viewers, guarantees that Colbert will become more firmly enmeshed in official politics. CBS executives hope that he will draw younger viewers who formerly watched “The Colbert Report.” As CBS chief executive Leslie Moonves bluntly put it, “Colbert could be a significant profit center” whose popularity among younger viewers means “a lot of major advertisers paying a lot of bucks.”

Colbert’s seamless transition from a political critic to conventional late night talk show host is perhaps the latest and perhaps most prominent example of the trajectory of a whole layer of “left” media figures who orbit the Democratic Party, including Stewart, Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann and others. Beyond their political affiliation, each of these figures also share a common superficiality, self-satisfaction and cynicism. These traits are rooted in their social position as highly privileged members of the upper middle class.



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