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2

With All Due Respect

Satirizing Presidents from Saturday Night Live *to* Lil' Bush

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Embodying his on-screen persona as a conservative talk show host, faux television pundit Stephen Colbert offered a mouth-dropping satirical performance as the featured speaker at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2006. As is typical in his television parodies on Comedy Central, Colbert proceeded to lambaste both the press and the president, neither of whom seemed to appreciate the effort. Not to make the same mistake twice, the organizers of the 2007 event took a safer route by hiring the crowd-pleasing presidential impersonator Rich Little for the evening's entertainment. But in reviving the long-since flagged career of the former late-night talk show staple, the event organizers reminded us of just how far television has come in its caricatures of presidents. For also appearing that same week on Comedy Central was the animated series, *Lil' Bush*, a portrayal of George W. Bush as a dim-witted and dangerous fifth-grader running amok in the White House and wreaking havoc across the world with his diabolical pals Lil' Cheney, Lil' Condi, and Lil' Rummy. The airing of these two different sets of caricatures demonstrated that the acceptable norms of television's treatment of the president have certainly changed.

Yet this was not the first time that Comedy Central had produced an entire series dedicated to satirizing President Bush. Beginning in April 2001, the network aired a short-lived series called *That's My Bush!*, a show with the announced intention of spoofing the sitcom genre, but also satirizing the current president and his family and staff in the process. In the

series, George W. Bush and Laura Bush are portrayed as the typical suburban sitcom couple, yet George is also painted as a simple-minded, lazy, privileged, and easily distracted man. The show's writers and producers, Trey Parker and Matt Stone of *South Park* fame, had planned to produce the program irrespective of which presidential candidate won the 2000 election (Bush or Al Gore). But with Bush emerging victorious in the contested election, he became the focus of the show. In turn, the series became the first bold move by the network in satirizing a sitting president in a not-so-flattering manner.

Taken together, *That's My Bush!* and *Lil' Bush* bookend the two-term presidency of George W. Bush. These portrayals are instructive because they represent how one cable network altered the course of how presidents are treated on television. Both programs are also series, representing the first time that entire shows were dedicated to satirizing the president. And, as discussed later in this chapter, both display an approach to political satire that is decidedly not the product of the safe, mass market thinking that is endemic to network television programming. To understand the force of these portrayals as political statements, it is helpful to contrast them with what came before. In this chapter, I chart the history of presidential caricatures on television, beginning with stand-up impersonators such as Rich Little and continuing through to the groundbreaking sketch comedy approach developed on *Saturday Night Live.* Since the mid-1970s, *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) has regularly processed presidential politics for viewers, offering interpretations that structured how images of the president were filtered through popular culture. But such caricatures are typically missing any form of meaningful political critique, instead depending largely on impersonation humor that is focused more on personal mannerisms and political style than on politics.

The shows that bookend the Bush presidency, however, offer a broader and more critical narrative frame for making meaning of the president as politician and office holder. As sitcom-styled series, they provide a specific satirical framework for scrutinizing the features that characterize the presidency in its historical context. They have also contributed to an era, in conjunction with other non-network television programming, where satire as a brutal art form has been revived. Hence, these shows lead us to rethink the necessary place, role, and function of satire in contemporary political culture and how such an important role has generally been absent from television for much of the medium's existence.

Saturday Night Live

What is somewhat remarkable about television in America until the 1970s is how little the networks directly engaged in humor about the presidency. Their earliest attempt at presidential satire was in the form of presidential impersonations. Vaughn Meader, who impersonated John F. Kennedy, gained popular success through his comedy album *The First Family.* He parlayed that fame into several appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show,* but his career ended abruptly with the assassination of Kennedy in 1963. Subsequently, one of the most famous presidential impersonators on television was Rich Little, who possessed an uncanny talent for capturing the voices and likeness of presidents. As luck would have it, he also bore a striking resemblance to President Richard Nixon and thus made a number of appearances on variety shows and late-night talk shows impersonating Nixon and, later, Presidents Carter, Reagan, and others.

In evaluating such performances as political satire, the question is whether the performers are criticizing the president or are simply using the president—the most familiar public figure in America—as part of their stand-up comedy shtick. With impersonation, the gist of the political performance is to look or sound as much like the president as possible. It is a mimetic performance, one in which the humor originates from hearing the president's voice come out of someone else's mouth. The interest for audiences resides less in any expectation of political critique and more in the simple pleasure of resemblance. As such, the performances are typically impotent politically, perhaps even flattering to politicians, with almost nothing in the routine that could be considered "satirical." This also suggests why such performances are popular: they are the lowest common denominator of political humor, with little to offend or provoke and much to share.

Presidential humor on television began to change in 1975, when a group of young comedians known as the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" began regularly ridiculing the president on a program that began as a counterculture classic, *Saturday Night Live.* Presidents had rarely been made fun of on television, but this new program boldly announced that television had a role in mocking the office of the president. On the fourth episode, comedian Chevy Chase opened the program with his impersonation of President Gerald Ford as a bumbling fool in what became