A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Democracy: Comedy and Politics in the Twentieth Century

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A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO DEMOCRACY:
COMEDY AND POLITICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

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Abstract

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO DEMOCRACY: COMEDY AND POLITICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2015

This research traces transformations in parody and satire in the ongoing symbiotic relationship between comedy and politics in order to entertain, inform, and provide a voice for the American people within the political system of the 20th century. This thesis juxtaposes political comedians Finley Peter Dunne, Will Rogers, and Mort Sahl, and the programs, Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, Laugh-In, and Saturday Night Live, with the presidents that were active during these years: William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Collectively, the analysis of these comedians and programs and their political rhetoric reveal the ways in which political-comedic relations have transformed from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century. In particular, across the twentieth century, there developed an (occasionally tumultuous) bond between comedy and politics in the 20th century. This relationship reflected the changes in American society, ultimately elevating comedy to a relevant and effective conduit between the American people and their government leaders.
Introduction

When President Barack Obama planned his strategy for spreading the word on the Obamacare insurance initiative in 2014, he chose as an ally comedian Zach Galifianakis. Comic and actor Galifianakis had hosted the Emmy award-winning internet talk show parody “Between Two Ferns” since 2008. The show is a favorite for appearances by A-list celebrities who expect the unexpected from host Galifianakis, as he vacillates between boredom and antagonism in his interview style. President Obama recognized that an appearance on this mock talk show would reach his target audience of young, uninsured Americans. True to form, Galifianakis opened the interview by half-heartedly apologizing for having to reschedule several times due to a broken mouse pad and the necessary errand of purchasing diabetes shoes for his great-aunt. The President and the funnyman proceeded to give each other awkward jabs about movie choices and plans for North Ikea before Obama went into the pitch for his insurance website. Galifianakis responds sarcastically with “Here we go, what did you come here to plug?”

Almost ten million internet hits later, both the president and the comic had met important goals. The president appeared neoteric while connecting with his chosen audience. The comic held his finger on the pulse of power by doing a favor for the president, yet also managed to broaden his appeal through a seemingly satiric and aloof demeanor. This episode is only a more recent example of a balancing act that evolved throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. Politics and comedy have fused in a way that has periodically benefited each institution. Despite controversy and occasional enmity,

comedy provides politicians with ways to appear humanized and psychologically approachable, while politics has provided comedians with material and the opportunity to appear relevant and cutting edge.

Americans look to comedy for entertainment and escape, but when it comes to political comedy, the elements expand to include germane information and diverse viewpoints in a three-way give and take of communication between politicians, comedians, and the American people. Why might Americans embrace comedy as a format for political thinking? First of all, it can be entertaining. Pertinent information can be expressed in a humorous way that drives out the requisite gloom and doom that accompanies war, taxes, and crooked politicians. Additionally, comedians are willing to say what people think. Whether through unabashed comic criticism or humorous lampoonery, comedians give amusing expression to what millions of Americans are thinking about politicians and the political process. This study will examine the symbiotic relationship between politics and comedy throughout the 20th century in order to show that the impact of parody is equivalent to satire as a currency between politicians, comedians, and the American people in order to influence, entertain, and communicate within the political process.

Although, all comedy regarding politics is considered political comedy, not all political comedy is created equally. It is important to define some parameters of understanding concerning political comedy. This study focuses on parody and satire, two sides of the comic coin. Parody can be most easily defined as mimicry of an established concept, idea, or person, while satire is mockery of a concept, idea, or person. Although these seem like only shades of difference, what sets these two styles apart is the goal of
each. Stephen E. Kercher defines satire as deploying “irony” in order to “criticize vice and raise awareness.” Political satirist, Mort Sahl explained the disturbing emotional impact of satire on an audience in a 1963 interview: “Though satire usually assumes the guise of entertainment, its intention is quite different, being to make people feel uncomfortable, guilty, or ashamed of what they believed, thought, or supported.” Russell L. Peterson explains that “genuine satire can give us information and insight that enhances our ability to fulfill our roles as citizens in a democracy.” This high praise for the impact of satire as a tool for democracy at times dismisses the seemingly lighter approach of political parody.

Not everyone sees all forms of comedy as useful. Peterson suggests that parody, which focuses “on personalities to the exclusion of policies and issues,” distracts Americans from their democratic responsibilities. Peterson goes on to argue vehemently against the dangers of parody, stating: “Satire nourishes our democracy, while the other stuff - let’s call it pseudo-satire - is like fast food: popular, readily available, cheap; tasty in its way, but ultimately unhealthy.” The emergence of strong, liberal satire in the 1950s and 1960s, was an effective means of expression for comedians and their audiences, but, contrary to Peterson’s sentiment, this in no way eliminates the need for, or

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importance of, the more light hearted comic parody enjoyed by endless American viewers. Parody provides a palliative comfort and commonality in the face of sociopolitical frustration.

Liberal satire was not more effective or relevant; rather, it was appropriately responsive to the social and political upheavals that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Comedians like Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, and George Carlin did not start their careers as political firebrand commentators; on the contrary, they were funny men who wanted to succeed at entertaining an audience. They simply entered the pantheon at a time of monumental social change and responded to that change through their performance. Joan Rivers explains this transition from one comic’s perspective:

> The Bob Hope’s and Danny Thomas’s and Milton Berle’s who had staffs of writers turning out what I had thought was comedy…Now we young comics, along with the country, were being liberated to go our own way, to develop our own very personal comedy, which we learned to write for ourselves, current humor describing human behavior by describing our own behavior, material nobody else could perform. I would leave far behind the one-liners I had once so avidly written in my notebook.\(^7\)

It is clear that this transition was equally disconcerting for many comedians. Comedians did not cause this change in society, they expanded and solidified change with their response to the concerns of the American psyche.

These mid-twentieth-century comics did the same thing that their predecessors, in figures like Peter Dunne and Will Rogers, had done before them; they gave the people what they wanted. Their success was directly linked to their ability to adjust to this sweeping change in American society. As American citizens, they took on the concerns of their fellow citizens, and expressed these concerns in the format most palatable to the

audiences they encountered, whether through parody or satire. In order to elucidate this process, this study examines individual representative relationships between comedians and the presidents that they parodied, satirized, and sometimes befriended. It will do so while contextualizing the political comedians’ background, and the evolution of their comedic style within their historical moment. Observed over time, these individuals and their relationships reveal the ways politics, comedy, and society as a whole, changed together, even while pointing to impact of parody and satire, separately or together.

Chapter one sets the stage in the opening of the 20th century, with the public warming to the idea of a more intimate understanding of and relationship with government, with a comedian as conduit. In 1892, Chicago columnist Finley Peter Dunne crafted a parody of an Irish immigrant in his alter-ego of Mr. Martin Dooley, to comment on the politics of the day. William McKinley and later Theodore Roosevelt both engaged with this humorist in an effort to better engage the American people. In the process, Dunne’s creation of Dooley helped give voice to the voiceless; revealing how a politician’s response to that voice could dictate how the public perceives powerful political figures.

Chapter two shows the solidifying relationship between comedy and politics, by introducing Will Rogers, an unassuming yet powerful force in the balance between the two institutions and between the subtlest forms of parody and satire. His three decades as a beloved political humorist reinforced humor as a relevant political tool, and caused presidents from Wilson to FDR, to actively pursue and cultivate the relationship with the comedian in order to strengthen a relationship with the public. In the process, such
comedic courtships reinforced the importance of public opinion to presidents, even while strengthening the public’s perception of the bond between humor and politics.

Chapter three shows that through satire, Americans continued to use comics as their voice, but that voice became louder, more adamant, and more frustrated in response to changes in society. By the 1950s, Mort Sahl’s angst-ridden satire became the popular expression of the day to presidents from Eisenhower to Nixon. Though harsh satire was the new normal, this chapter shows that despite the conflicted relationship between comedy and politics in the post war era, political satire was not the pivot point of comic righteous indignation that many scholars attest to. Rather, satire reflected American attitudes and the dynamic nature of the ongoing relationship that comedy and politics shared.

In Chapter four, two variety shows of the late 1960s provide a show-down between satire and parody, but they ultimately reinforce the need for both. The seemingly innocuous Tom and Dick Smothers used *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to battle both CBS and the politics of the 1960s even while stretching the boundaries of political commentary through comedy. On NBC, the counter-culture lampoonery on *Rowen and Martin’s Laugh-In* allowed establishment regulars to feel a part of the young in-crowd. These comedy variety programs of the 60s and 70s displayed a series of attack and retract attitudes in a relationship with politics that was ultimately reflective of the larger society.

Chapter five shows a peaceful coexistence between comedy and politics and between satire and parody. After the in your face comic relevance of earlier political satire, show creator, Lorne Michaels and *Saturday Night Live* allowed America to just laugh. The show developed into a clearinghouse for political parody and even took tasty bites a satire
from time to time, while allowing candidates a spot to showcase their good humor and likeability. SNL was the litmus test of how relevant they were as candidates and how well they could take the joke.

The conclusion encapsulates the process of change in comedy and politics over time that has transformed the face of politics, comedy, and society. Throughout the ebb and flow of politics in the twentieth century, comedy has remained a consistent foil to politicians who inevitably forget their feet are made of clay. Inevitably, when this happens, there is a comic beneath them, molding those feet into funny looking flowerpots. But the jester is no longer a fool; he is a relevant part of a political process that requires candidates to find their niche within the comic panacea in order to be accessible and understood by an American people who use comedy to inform their political ideals and opinions.
Chapter One
The Beginning-Mr. Dooley

In April of 1893, the World’s Columbian Exposition, more commonly known as the Chicago World’s Fair, opened on the banks of Lake Michigan heralding Chicago as a thriving and vibrant American city of rebirth. Just over two decades earlier, the great Chicago fire had devastated the city. In the course of those intervening years population had grown from 300,000 to 1.3 million, due in large part to immigration. The World’s Fair provided an exciting spectacle of varied cultures that awed the curious spectators. Newspaperman, Finley Peter Dunne took advantage of this public fascination by creating Colonel Malachi McNeery, a genial Irishman to provide comic editorial commentary. Dunne based the fictitious McNeery upon Jim McGarry, a favorite bartender working in a Tenderloin District bar Dunne and his fellow journalists frequented, in doing so, he began to craft a voice that would play a key role in political humor at the turn of the century.  

McNeery enjoyed weekly visits to the fair followed by light-hearted comical reviews retold in an Irish colloquial brogue, a parody of many local Irish immigrants. The gruff, yet witty Colonel reported on the diversity of offerings early on in the Fair’s run:

‘I don't give anything for the fair itself, what do I ca-are for show cases full of dhried prunes, ould r-rocks an' silk handkerchers! I was f'r goin' over to see Buffalo Willie shootin' Injuns an' rescuin' Annie Oakley from the red divvles, but O'Connor sez: 'No,' he sez, 'come on an' see the Midway,' he sez.’

By the end of the fair, the articles were a Chicago favorite for everyone but character prototype, McGarry, who was no longer amused with his new celebrity status.

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Alas, Colonel McNeery took the boat home to Ireland, leaving the way clear for his successor, Mr. Martin Dooley, Dunne’s most efficacious creation. From the close of the Chicago World’s Fair until the beginning of World War I, Dunne used the likeable curmudgeon and barkeep, Martin Dooley to comment on social and political interests within the hardscrabble Southside neighborhood of ‘Archey Road’ and the greater metropolitan area of Chicago. He became a favorite commentator for all Chicagoans, and after an article in 1899 praising Admiral George (Cousin George) Dewey’s defeat of the Spanish Fleet in Manila Bay, newspapers began to syndicate Mr. Dooley’s musings nationwide.  

Peter Finley Dunne was quite familiar with the Irish dialect and the immigrant experience. He was born in 1867, in the shadow of Old Saint Patrick’s Catholic Church, where his Uncle was the first pastor. His father and mother were both born in Ireland and immigrated as children. The family thrived in the middle class Irish neighborhood just west of downtown Chicago; “the place where one went when moving out of Bridgeport and up to respectability.” Precocious Peter’s well-read mother encouraged him. Dunne was the only one of her eight children to attend high school. Despite Peter’s relatively comfortable upbringing and education, his consideration for the less fortunate and newer Irish immigrants struggling in the crowded nearby Bridgeport neighborhood would color his future endeavors.

After his mother’s death, Dunne was a restless student who finished high school and went to work as an office boy at the Chicago Telegram, beginning a rapid ascent into

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10 Fanning, Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley, 9.
11 Fanning, Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley, 4.
journalism and society. Dunne proceeded to wind his way through the maze of some thirty-odd Chicago papers in production just prior to the turn of the twentieth century. The *Telegram* drafted him as a crime reporter. At the *Chicago Daily News* he traveled with and wrote on the Chicago White Sox. From there, Dunne went on to work for the *Chicago Times*, where he proved to be an eloquent political reporter during the national convention of 1888. This acclaim won him the editorship of the *Times*; but it was at the *Chicago Evening Post* that he was welcomed into a higher echelon of Chicago society. Author, social maven, and *Post* book reviewer, Mary Ives Abbott welcomed Dunne into her informal literary salon. Dunne subsequently joined the family when he married Abbott’s daughter, Margaret, in 1902.12

Despite Dunne’s improved opportunities, Chicago of the early Twentieth Century was “a stormy, sprawling monster of a place, stuffed to bursting with unconscionable extremes.”13 Dunne was as pure an example of these extremes as any man, soon achieving the American dream in America’s dream city, while first generation Irish-Americans like himself struggled to maintain subsistence. As Chicago became a leader in meat-packing, manufacturing, banking, and investments, thousands were homeless and starved in the streets. In Rudyard Kipling’s *American Notes* he described the state in which he found the poor of Chicago:

> I looked down interminable vistas flanked with nine, ten, and fifteen-storied houses, and crowded with men and women . . . I had never seen so many white people together, and never such a collection of miseries.14

12 Fanning, *Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley*, 33-4.
13 Fanning, *Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley*, 3.
This grinding struggle was especially true for immigrants pouring into ethnically segregated neighborhoods like Bridgeport. Chicago was growing into an urbane national powerhouse on the backs of new Americans attempting to embrace their American-ness as they clung to old country rituals for comfort.

Recognizing the impact of the newcomers and the curiosity of longtime residents, many papers embraced urban local color with a wide variety of offerings from the burgeoning ethnic neighborhoods. An interview with a French chef or an Italian pawnshop keeper might be followed the next week by visits to a Lithuanian, black, or Chinese neighborhood. Often parodies of foreign dialects were incorporated into these stories. As the son of immigrants, Dunne was uniquely qualified to convincingly portray the landscape of Irish immigrant community:

Up in Archey road the streetcar wheels squeaked along the tracks and the men coming down from the rolling-mills hit themselves on their big chests and wiped their noses on their leather gloves with a peculiar back-handed stroke at which they are most adept. The little girls coming out of the bakeshops with loaves done up in brown paper under their arms had to keep a tight clutch on their thin shawls lest those garments should be caught up by the bitter wind blowing from Brighton Park way and carried down to the gashouse.15

Dunne’s identification with this ethnic Irish neighborhood went beyond his recognition of their struggles and his ability to pen a convincing Roscommon brogue. Dunne also witnessed the strong political bent in the Irish community that would eventually produce a line of four democrats from Bridgeport who held the Chicago mayoral office for 46 unbroken years.16 It was with this combination of grassroots political activism,


intelligence based more on common sense than a formal education, and wit enmeshed with Irish melancholy that Dunne sought to create his alter-ego. Dunne’s fellow journalists also contributed to the process.

Dunne and other young journalists in the Chicago paper business were determined to establish themselves as separate from the older writers who had previously held sway over paper content, going so far as to distinguish themselves from their elders and their fashions by remaining “clean-shaven to set themselves apart from their bewhiskered elders.”

Larzer Ziff explains that these were "men who insisted on talking to one another about the hypocrisy of the social system even while they were being paid to explain it away." Dunne and his fellow journalists balanced the hypocrisy they were party to, through ribald entertainment and the creation of a secret society, the Whitechapel Club (so named for the location of the recent Jack the Ripper assaults).

The members of the Whitechapel Club met in the back of a favorite bar. Made up primarily of journalists, the club drank, reveled, and created elaborate rituals with a decidedly macabre tone. Police officer friends donated weapons and bones from infamous crimes, which decorated the private club space. The main board table was a coffin. The Whitechapel Club was a place where these observers and commentators on the inequities of life came to vent their frustrations, and fashion these complaints into articles. Like a high risk toastmasters club, members gave speeches and read early drafts


of articles, in character and with varying dialects. The elite “sharpshooters” within the group, of whom Dunne was one, would then relentlessly heckle and demean the speaker. Lawrence Lorenz calls it “a kind of a participatory Saturday Night Live” where members entertained one another and their occasional visitors.\(^{19}\)

Whitechapelers like Dunne embraced irreverent displays and as Michael Schudson has pointed out, these newsmen were, “as eager to mythologize [their work]...as the public was to read of their adventures.”\(^{20}\) One such adventure had the Club fulfilling the request of Morris A. Collins, a previous visitor who subsequently committed suicide. The club gathered funds and resources in order to burn the body of Collins on a funeral pyre at the Indian Dunes on Lake Michigan. After much eulogizing, the body burned for five hours before the newsmen rushed back to the news desk to submit stories about the event.\(^{21}\)

It was just such events, both extreme and mundane that Mr. Dooley commented on. He discussed local festivals, holidays, and religious celebrations with the same philosopher’s tone as political elections, taxes, and war. Dunne included a cast of characters real and imagined into his columns as visitors to Dooley’s bar. The oft-featured John McKenna was an actual Bridgeport businessman and councilman, while Dooley’s always faithful sidekick, Hennessey, a continual bar patron and verbal foil, was an amalgam of Bridgeport locals. Dunne chose the surname’s Dooley and Hennessey

\(^{19}\) Lorenz, “The Whitechapel Club”, 33.


\(^{21}\) Lorenz, “The Whitechapel Club”, 33.
because they were the most common family names in Bridgeport. He devotes his 1900 publication, *Mr. Dooley’s Philosophy*, to the prototypical average Irishman, declaring: “Go to the Hennessey’s of the World who suffer and are silent.”

Dunne was aware of the cacophony of wise and witty voices emanating from the mills, stockyards, and bars of the bleakest neighborhoods. With Mr. Dooley in print, Dunne attempted to ensure that no Hennessey was forced to suffer in silence. Peter M. Robinson asserts that Dunne understood “the role of humorist as not merely a performer but also a public oracle.” The parody, or amusing mimicry, of an Irish bar-keep, invented to spread humor and local color, evolved into an opportunity for Dunne to satirize, injustice in the local, and later national political system, pointedly mocking potential political weaknesses. Dooley was very much a reflection of Dunne, wise and well-read, quoting Shakespeare and the Bible and using everyday banter to shine a light on the humanity of his subjects. Ultimately his influence grew to a point that the Dooley’s and Hennessey’s of the world held sway with the most powerful leader in the land.

Dunne addressed issues of national interest in his Dooley columns, juxtaposing local issues with national ones, such as advising President Grover Cleveland to adopt the same tact with an intractable congress that Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison had in finessing Bridgeport aldermen in order to place a trash dump in their neighborhood.

Fanning asserts wistfully that over time, “all that remains of Bridgeport is Mr. Dooley's

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voice, engaged exclusively in discussions of the wider world.”24 The McKinley-Bryan presidential race piqued Dunne’s national political interests. This shift was in no small part due to the purchase of Dunne’s paper by fervent McKinley republican, Herman H. Kohlsaat, who impressed his political beliefs onto the editorship of the Post. Dunne’s only recourse for free expression was through the satiric reflections of Mr. Dooley.

Dunne did not hesitate to heavily critique the president on boiling international issues. Countless Americans, including some in congress, were frustrated with the lack of tangible assistance that McKinley was willing to give Cubans that were attempting to fight Spanish oppression. President McKinley clung to diplomatic efforts as a resolution, until the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor forced his hand. Dooley blasted McKinley’s lack of diplomatic skill in dealing with Spanish Prime Minister Sagasta, observing: “He cud do him at rasslin' or chasin' th' greased pig. . . But, whin it comes to di-plo-macy, th' Spanyard has him again th' rail;” and chided McKinley’s ineffective war strategists who failed to create a decisive plan of engagement during the Spanish-American War: “Little we thought iv th' mothers at home weepin' f'r their brave boys down at Washin'ton hur-rtin their poor eyes over a checker-board.”25

However, for the son of immigrants, Dunne’s personal concerns always returned to the local disenfranchised and in the closing days of the war, in a question Dooley offers to Hennessey, he points out the futility of American spoils: “If yer son Packy was to ask ye where th' Ph'lippeens is, cud ye give him anny good idea whether

24 Fanning, Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley, 177.

they was in Rooshia or jus' west iv th' thracks?” Dunne railed over American proprietorship of Cuba, Guam and the Philippines when Americans in downtrodden neighborhoods like Bridgeport were starving in the streets.

Dunne recognized the power of humor in voicing his challenges to presidential authority. Presidents Cleveland, McKinley, and Roosevelt were each the targets of Mr. Dooley’s biting comic send up, as were local political bosses, who sometimes possessed treacherous reputations for retribution. In an interview in 1938, Dunne acknowledged the security his Mr. Dooley provided: "If I had written the same thing in English I would inevitably have been pistedl or slugged, as other critics were. But my victims did not dare to complain. They felt bound to smile and treat these highly libelous articles as mere humorous skits.”

Dunne could also use his genial verbiage to make subtle but effective points. As President McKinley, prepared for an upcoming visit to Chicago, Mr. Dooley extended an invitation:

Th’ President is as welcome (here) is anny rapsctable married man. I will give him a chat an’ to dhrink f’r fifteen cints, . . .I’l giv . . .two f’r twenty five cints, which is th’ standard iv value among civilized nations th’ wurruld over. President iv th’ United States, says ye? Well, I’m prisdent iv this liquor store . . . “if ye find ye’ersilf thrun fr’m a ca- ar in me neighborhood drhop in.” An there ye ar-re.

Here Dunne is bringing the president down to the level of any respectable married man who might wander into Dooley’s bar for a drink. Additionally, he brings the president

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26 Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War*, 53.


28 Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War*, 81.
down one rung further, equating him socially to a man who may get tossed from a car, apparently by those unhappy with his faulty policies. The message is clear: we the American people have a right to disagree because you are, after all, one of us.

McKinley’s successor, Theodore Roosevelt embraced the opportunity to use this humanizing effect to his benefit. The resulting relationship was the epitome of the synergistic bond between comedy and politics. The first mutual interaction between the newsman and the war hero was an exchange of letters that occurred when Dunne produced a review of Roosevelt’s *The Rough Riders*, the then New York Governors personal account of his activities in the Spanish-American War:

We had no sooner landed in Cubia than it become necessry f'r me to take command iv th' ar-rmy which I did at wanst. This showed me 'twud be impossible f'r to carry th' war to a successful con-clusion unless I was free, so I sint th' ar-rmy home an’ attackted San Juon hill. Ar-rmed on'y with a small thirty-two which I used in th' West to shoot th' fleet prairie dog... I fired at th' man nearest to me an' .... Th’ bullet sped on its mad flight an' passed through th' intire line fin'lly imbeddin' itself in th' abdomen iv th' Ar-rch-bishop iv Santiago eight miles away. This ended th' war.'

The final line “Alone in Cubia” for a time became part of the national comic vernacular, not unlike the “strategery” or “lockbox” of recent years. According to historian, Peggy Samuels, “Sophisticated readers relished Mr. Dooley’s widely circulated lampoon.”

This was Dunne’s first foray in effecting the zeitgeist of national politics.

Roosevelt’s response to this ego-bursting column was customarily jovial and cunning. The governor immediately reached out to Dunne with a self-effacing rejoinder

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and an invitation. In a letter three days after the review appeared, Roosevelt wrote to Dunne:

> I regret to state that my family and intimate friends are delighted with your review of my book. Now I think you owe me one; and I shall exact that when you next come east you pay me a visit. I have long wanted the chance of making your acquaintance.\(^{31}\)

For many years following, Teddy enjoyed relaying the story of a charming woman at a dinner who complemented his writing, claiming she had read everything he had written. When Roosevelt asked here which she preferred, she exclaimed, “Of course, *Alone in Cuba.*”\(^{32}\)

With this first missive from Roosevelt to Dunne, it is clear that the relationship between comedy and politics was in many ways first established with Roosevelt’s formation of the modern presidency. As Doris Kearns Goodwin argues, Roosevelt recognized the power of his bully pulpit to bring structure and regulation to the formerly laissez faire American economy. This created a “need to develop powerfully reciprocal relationships with members of the national press.”\(^{33}\) Famous Progressive newsman, William Allen White, referred to the press’s inclusion as “Government by magazine”\(^{34}\) Dunne recognized that his position as a social and political commentator would only increase Roosevelt’s desire to befriend him. Aviva Taubenfield suggests that Dunne was

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\(^{32}\) Elmer Ellis, *Mr. Dooley’s America: A Life of Finley Peter Dunne* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 146.


\(^{34}\) Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit*, 467.
initially weary of a personal association with Roosevelt for this reason.\textsuperscript{35} Despite Dunne’s reticence, Roosevelt’s relationship with the press, although pragmatic, did not “stem from calculation alone.”\textsuperscript{36} As a writer, historian, and man of great wit, Roosevelt felt a true kinship to the craft. Goodwin confirms, “He knew and revered writers, and his relationship with journalists was authentically collegial.”\textsuperscript{37}

In Finley Peter Dunne, Roosevelt found a droll yet thoughtful counterpart who would grow to respect the president even when he openly disagreed with him. Often the jester is the only one who can tell the king the truth, and Dunne was unwavering in both his admiration of Roosevelt and his willingness to publish his opinions for better or worse. Dunne’s response to Roosevelt’s initial invitation was an agreement to visit when next he was in New York and regret that any friendship might lead to the loss of a target for his satire: “The number of persons who are worthwhile firing at is so small that as a matter of business I must regret the loss of one of them.”\textsuperscript{38} Dunne ultimately gained the friendship and retained the target, although a social visit would not occur until Roosevelt left the Governor’s mansion for the White House.

Teddy Roosevelt recognized that Dunne could be a useful ally. In June of 1900, during the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, Roosevelt gave Dunne an exclusive interview. Despite his reluctance, Roosevelt announced that he would run for vice-president. And run he did, with Mr. Dooley highlighting his efforts for an inquiring


\textsuperscript{36} Goodwin, \textit{The Bully Pulpit}, xii.

\textsuperscript{37} Goodwin, \textit{The Bully Pulpit}, xii.

\textsuperscript{38} Goodwin, \textit{The Bully Pulpit}, 258.
nation: “If there is anywun runnin’ in this campaign but me friend Tiddy Rosenfelt, I’d like ta know who t’is. Tis Tiddy alone that’s runnin’, and he ain’t runnin’, he’s gallopin.’”  

Roosevelt’s ambivalence over being restrained in the role of vice-president was short lived, due to the assassination of McKinley at the hands of deranged anarchist, Leon Czolgosz.  

Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as president on September 14, 1901.  

The syndication of Dunne’s Mr. Dooley columns and the publication of collections of the column provided him with a certain economic independence. In 1900, Dunne moved to New York. As Roosevelt settled into his new office, Dunne settled into matrimony with his spirited young wife Margaret, a golfer who had won the first Olympic Gold medal given to a woman just two years prior at the Paris Olympics.  

Roosevelt read of their wedding in the paper and sent another letter off to the humorist, insisting that they visit. Despite Dunne’s original hesitation, the Dunne’s and Roosevelt’s became fast friends, a relationship that they maintained over the years, with Teddy even insisting that Dunne enroll his son in Groton, where the presidential offspring attended.  

Unlike politicians before and since, Teddy Roosevelt did not require any help to seem human. He had a large, gracious, and good-humored personality that drew people to him; however, in the days before television and the internet, newspapers were the primary way to project one’s image beyond face to face interaction. Dunne shared an

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42 Gibson, *Theodore Roosevelt Among the Humorists*, 47.
account of a boisterous and candid Roosevelt’s interaction with a careless trolley driver, early in his presidency:

“Did you see what th’ Prisidint said to th’throlly man that bumped him?” asked Mr. Dooley.
“I did not” said Mr. Hennessey “what was it?”
“I can’t tell ye till I get mad” said Mr. Dooley “Lave us go into ixicutive sission. Whisper. That was it. Ha,ha. He give it to him straigh. A good honest American blankety blank. Rale language like father used to make whin he hit his thumb with a hammer… a dacint Damn ye, sir an’a little more f’r th’ sake uv emphasis….. engraved in th’ hearts of ‘is counthrymen is what Rosenfelt said to th’ throlly man. Twas good because twas so nachrel.”

In this display of political and comedic cohesion, Dunne uses Mr. Dooley to expand Roosevelt’s popular reach through his column, and also portrays the robust politician as having a common and ‘nachrel’ touch to his character. This characterization provided an affirming influence to any reader that had concerns about the new president.

Despite the favorable take on Roosevelt’s personality, the same column voiced the president’s conflicted take on trusts. Mimicking “Tiddy”, Mr. Dooley ponders on the question of trusts: “On wan hand I wud stamp thim undher fut; on th’ other hand not so fast.” With criticisms such as this Dunne proves to be a fairly balanced political humorist, gently praising through parody and punishing the president with satire in equal parts. Dunne never claimed any particular party affiliation and his columns were not geared toward encouraging any partisan outcome. He was a newsman and a humorist, and what his audience would appreciate, enjoy, and believe in was his guiding principle. Despite Dunne’s remarkably apolitical approach to political commentary, he recognized

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44 Dunne, *Observations by Mr. Dooley’s*, 225.
the impact of the written word: “Dooley marveled, “when a state [wanted] to elect a
governor or a city a mayor,” it turned not to professional politicians but to Lincoln
Steffens. “Yes,” decried Mr. Dooley, “the hand that rocks the fountain pen is the hand
that rules the world.””45

Dunne’s goal to entertain and inform, regardless of political point of view, is
evident as much in what he did not print as in what he did. In the first federal intervention
in a strike, Roosevelt organized a commission to investigate conditions in Pennsylvania
anthracite coal mines, prompting strikers to go back to work. After three months of
hearings, miners were given a nine hour work day and a six man arbitration committee,
but unions were not recognized. Railroad representative, George Baer stated in his
closing argument: "These men don't suffer. Why, hell, half of them don't even speak
English."46 Notwithstanding, the opposition of leaders of industry, Roosevelt’s actions
secured coal before a long winter. He promptly contacted his friend Peter Dunne:

My Dear Mr. Dunne: I have not had the heart to write to you until this coal strike
was out of the way. Now I feel like throwing up my hands and going to the circus;
but as that is not possible I think I shall try a turkey shoot or bear hunt or
something of that kind instead.47

Dunne responded that he had struggled to write about the strike in his column, but was
overwhelmed by the “tragedy” of the situation and the “selfishness and blank stupidity”

45 Goodwin, The Bully Pulpit, 467.

46 Walter T. K. Nugent, Progressivism: a very short introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2010) 38.

47 Theodore Roosevelt, “Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Finley Peter Dunne, October 20, 1902”.
Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Manuscripts division. The Library of Congress.
Nov 5, 2014).
of the mine operators. “I confess that I made several attempts to deal with it as a comedy but I had to give it up.”

Dunne realized the lesson that all politic satirists must learn, it is possible to make humor from any topic, but a tragic approach to an issue, does not lend itself to laughter.

On other issues, Dunne did not find himself short of comment. What could be considered Roosevelt’s first controversial action was his decision to invite African American advisor, Booker T. Washington, to dinner at the White House not long after Roosevelt took office. Many critics, especially in the South, were up in arms at what they perceived to be a lack of proper decorum. Mr. Dooley’s observations pertaining to this incident highlight Dunne’s use of satire within parody, showcasing inequity and the need for change, all the while using the verbiage and demeanor of the most conservative bigot:

“’I’ts goin’ to be th’ roonation iv Prisidint Tiddy’s chances in th’ South. Thoussan’s iv men who wudden’t have voted f’r him undher any circumstances has declared that under no circumstances wud they now vote f’r him.”

Dooley comments on Washington’s “gintlemanly” demeanor at dinner and questions the state of segregation in the present dwelling place of another Washington:

P’raps where George is he has to assocyate with many mimbres iv th’ Booker brand on terms iv akequality. I don’t suppose they have partitions up in th’ other wurruld like th’ kind they have in th’ ears down South. They can’t be any Crow Hiviin. I wonder how they keep up race supremacy. Maybe they get on without it.

Dunne correspondingly gives no quarter to the North with his biting satire:

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Ivry year wan or more naygurs is given a good idjacation an’ put on a North bound freight with a warnin’. But whin it comes to havin’ him set down at th’ table with us we dhraw th’ color line an’ th’ six shooter. The black has many fine qualities. He is joyus, lighthear
ted, an’ aisily lynched.  

This comedic style is a forerunner to that of Stephen Colbert, in its effort to illuminate conservative bigotry by seeming to advocate it.

Dunne then takes a jab at Roosevelt, who backed off his plan for more visits from blacks in Washington in order to appease his critics. Mr. Dooley excuses his own unwillingness to serve blacks in his bar: “But bein’ that I – an the prisidint – is public servants an’ manny iv our customers has onrais’nable prejoodices…” neither can abide black patronage. Finally, Dooley suggests that the concern for the rights of the black man are pointless if he cannot be allowed to live unthreatened from physical harm:

I’d take away his right to vote an’ his right to ate at th’ same table an’ his right to ride on th’ cars an’ even his sacred right to wurruk. I’d take thim all away an give him th’ only right he needs nowadays in th’ South, the right to live.

Taubenfield points out that “In effect Dooley argues that though Roosevelt made a social statement through his dinner with Washington, he was not doing enough to defend the basic rights of African Americans.” It is startling how direct, clear, and scathing Dunne’s satiric attack was on the attitudes that maintain racial injustice. This voice of dissent for the Jim Crow South and the relative racism of the North could ring just as

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53 Dunne, *Mr. Dooley’s Opinions*, 212.
54 Aviva F. Taubenfeld, *Rough Writing*, 211.
clearly in 1965 as 1901. Still, Dunne was not speaking out from a political point of view, but a human one.

Despite his typical open-mindedness, Dunne’s Irish-American heritage colored his attitude on Englishmen. On this issue in particular, Dunne and the President were clearly in opposition. Early on, Dunne suspected Roosevelt of pro-English sympathies and as a son of Ireland, he would have none of it. When Lord Charles Beresford, British Admiral and Member of Parliament, came to America on a speaking tour, Dooley balked, derisively suggesting that Roosevelt, Beresford, and Rudyard Kipling should form an alliance to spread civilization. In a follow-up column Mr. Dooley mocks Roosevelt’s anglophile bias:

You an' me, Hinnissy, has got to bring on this here Anglo-Saxon 'lieance. An Anglo-Saxon, Hinnissy, is a German that's forgot who was his parents. Mack [President McKinley] is an Anglo-Saxon. Teddy Rosenfelt is another Anglo-Saxon. An' I'm an Anglo-Saxon. I'm wan iv th' hottest Anglo-Saxons that iver come out iv Anglo-Saxony. Schwartzmeister is an Anglo-Saxon, but he doesn't know it, an' won't till some wan tells him…an' me ol' frind Dominigo…will march at th' head iv th' Dago Anglo-Saxons whin th' time comes. Th' Bohemians an' Pole Anglo-Saxons may be a little slow in wakin' up to what th' pa-apers calls our common hurtage, but ye may be sure they'll be all r-right whin they're called on.55

Not unlike the political comedians that would follow, Dunne did not allow his fondness for Roosevelt to prevent him from speaking up on issues that he believed in, or felt his audience believed in. This balance was, and continues to be necessary in the relationship between comedy and politics.

Dunne was not a political Progressive; however he was persuaded by muckraking journalists, Ray Stannard Baker, Ida M. Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens to join their new

55 Dunne, Mr. Dooley in Peace and War, 53-7.
venture, *The American Magazine*, in 1906. Baker was pleased to have Dunne’s humor and perspective: “Everything amused him! We were youthful and dead in earnest—and he was wise.”56 Perhaps it was Dunne’s lack of a political agenda that these vocal Progressives found so refreshing or maybe it was just his sagaciousness. Tarbell recalled, “He had a wide knowledge of men and their ways.”57

*The American* benefited from Dunne’s influence and he helped them to move further afield from their libelous attacks. The magazine shifted toward human interest material and thrived until its dissolution in 1956. In his columns, Dunne’s Dooley cautioned readers that fear-mongering about corruption and vice made it seem as though “the world is little better …than a convict’s camp.”58 The president appreciated Dunne’s rational approach to storytelling and in a letter the president wrote to Dunne: “I get sick of people who are always insisting upon nothing but the dark side of life,” he continued “There are a lot of things that need correction in this country; but there is not the slightest use of feeling over-pessimistic about it.”59

William M. Gibson states that because Dunne’s opinions on Roosevelt were “both sympathetic and condemnatory” they are somehow, “more penetrating on the whole than the judgments of Americans at large.”60 On the contrary, Dunne’s opinions were


60 Gibson, *Theodore Roosevelt Among the Humorists*, 64.
penetrating because he shared the good judgment of Americans at large. Dunne recognized that Americans perceived McKinley as a weaker president that had been often controlled by political cronies, and he expressed their lackluster opinion in his column. However, his judgment of Roosevelt was one of admiration for the man and discriminating consideration for his individual actions. This characterization was also a reflection of the public’s admiration. Much of Dunne’s success, as would be the case for successful satirists to follow, was based upon an astute regard for the inclinations of the American public. Roosevelt called Dunne the “laughing philosopher” and after the Presidents death, Dunne concluded that to be in his company, “the saints will have to go disguised as boxers, scholars, jockeys, prestidigitators” and perhaps, “minor journalists who see nothing sacrilegious in laughter.”

Why was Dunne’s counterpart, Mr. Dooley, such an effective conveyor of the countries concerns? As in Chicago, the population was growing across the country. This increase included an explosion of new cultures, traditions, and views in the form of immigrants mostly from Europe that totaled 13.5 million by 1910. In addition to this immigrant increase, or to some degree, because of it, the gap between the haves and have not’s was also increasing. The nation was growing in industry, transportation, and manufacturing. Those in positions to make money were reaping the benefits of our countries growth. Those in a position to do the manual work of this growth were quickly caught up in an endless cycle of meager survival.

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61 Gibson, Theodore Roosevelt Among the Humorists, 62.

For the immigrant who toiled relentlessly, the only respite came when sharing miseries with like-minded companions. This is the voice that Mr. Dooley became. In a wonderful early example of parody as an effective political tool, what struggling immigrants shared in their private confidences, Mr. Dooley voiced for them each week:

I was afraid I wasn’t goin’ to assimilate with th’ airlyer pilgrim fathers an’ th’ instichoochins iv th’ country, but I soon found that a long swing iv th’ pick made me as good as another man . . ., an’ before I was here a month, I felt enough like a native born American to burn a witch.”

He shared their joys with descriptions of weddings and local religious festivals, he shared their humor and their hopes. He shared their fears at the potential violence that ensued during local elections, and then he shared their frustration when elected Ward bosses failed to live up to their promises. Where Mr. Dooley had been their knowing companion on local issues, he became their symbolic representative on national ones. Mr. Dooley stood between the powerful and the powerless as a pragmatic yet sympathetic liaison.

According to Peter M. Robinson:

Dunne quickly understood what comedians before him had learned from the page and the stage: that the guise of Mr. Dooley and the apparent triviality of humor gave him both the license to criticize and the chance to endow his ethnically diverse readership vicariously with the measure of cultural and political power through their laughter.”

Dunne’s ability to provide a voice explains the profound connection between Mr. Dooley and his poor and immigrant listeners, how then, does this translate to syndication in

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64 Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians*, 50.
papers across the country that made Mr. Dooley a regular read for the likes of “Andhrew Carnaygie” and “Jawn Rockerfeller”65

Taubenfield asserts that “Dooley Irishizes the American elite”66 therefore making them his own. In doing so, Mr. Dooley also fulfilled many objectives for these more fortunate Americans. By claiming a connection to these captains of industry, they could also claim a bond to the common man, assuaging any guilt they might feel. These men undoubtedly held a desire to give back for altruistic or self-edifying reasons. When Andrew Carnegie gave a ten-million dollar award for the creation of libraries, Mr. Dooley identified with the philanthropical action:

“Andhrew Carnaygie” says Mr. Dooley, “He reaches down into his pocket where he keeps th’ change an’ pulls up tin million bawbies an’ says he: ‘Boys, take ye’er fill iv larnin’ an’ charge it to me,’ he says. That’s th’ way we do it, Andhrew an’ me.”67

By both documenting and minimizing Carnegie’s philanthropical giving, Dunne recognized the benefit to the poor, but also the embedded elitist mentality that considered poverty to be a result of poor character.

Dunne also provided a finger on the pulse of the average man. By the early 20th century, cognizant readers were aware that Dunne now lived a comfortable life in New York as a published writer, member of the social elite, and friend to the President. This change, notwithstanding, Dunne never let go of his Irish immigrant roots, or his personal integrity and belief in social justice. Political columnist Mark Shields states of Dunne,

65 Dunne, Mr. Dooley’s Opinions, 156.

66 Taubenfeld, Rough Writing, 138.

67 Dunne, Mr. Dooley’s Opinions, 156.
“The underdog was always his cause, and he was always the underdog's champion.”

Mr. Dooley’s opinion was so relevant that Roosevelt had excerpts read regularly at cabinet meetings, demonstrating the sway held by a mere political comedian.

Perhaps the most germane reason that prominent men and paupers alike read Mr. Dooley’s commentary, is because Dunne was a masterful writer. Social historian, JC Furnas, contends that, “Between Mark Twain and Mr. Dooley, the latter better fits the notion of a national humorist.” In later years, Samuel Clemens descended into bitterness, and his writing reflected his frustrations. Dunne, however remained true to his voice, his wit, and his audience throughout his sojourn as Mr. Dooley. His columns were funny and folksy, but also bold and unwavering. It is a true test of Dunne’s literary gift that despite the fact he was writing about politics over one hundred years ago, and using the voice of an uneducated Irish immigrant, his “…comments on national politics remain fresh enough for resurrection and application to the current political campaign.”

What was Teddy Roosevelt’s motivation for befriending Finley Peter Dunne? Even before Roosevelt was Vice-President, he knew that he had designs on the 1904 presidency. It only makes sense that Roosevelt, “desired the production and circulation of the image Dooley offered.” Dunne produced 700 Mr. Dooley columns. Newspapers of the day were cheap and easy to come across expanding readership; and Dunne’s first

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70 Fanning, Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley, 9.

71 Taubenfeld, Rough Writing, 140.
book, *Mr. Dooley in War and Peace*, a reprint of select columns, was an instant best seller. This is a testament to his national popularity. Chase Mader in the *American Conservative* stated, “Though Mr. Dooley has been nearly forgotten since the 1930s, in his prime he was the subject of comic strips and pop songs and quoted widely by presidents and Parliaments.” Dunne represents the early influence of comedy on the functioning of American government, primarily in its relationship to the electorate.

Without question, Roosevelt benefitted from his association with Dunne. Taubenfield asserts that “at the same time Dunne created Roosevelt as one of the people, he attributed superhuman powers to the president.” One article describes the President as taking a swim in a salty sea, instructing his toddler sons on horsemanship, and wrestling a bear all before breakfast at 6:00 AM and a start to “thransaet[in’] th’ nation's business.” Dunne used his platform to humorously express who he believed the President to be. This manly and exuberant image of Roosevelt is similarly expressed by naturalist and Roosevelt companion, John Burroughs, who stated that Roosevelt was, “a man of such abounding energy and ceaseless activity that he sets everything in motion around him wherever he goes.” Roosevelt portrayed the type of vitality a 20th century America was hungry for, and Dunne was happy to disseminate the image.

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73 Taubenfeld, *Rough Writing*, 140.

74 Dunne, *Observations by Mr. Dooley*, 181-6.

As beneficial as these images were to a young president, columns in which Mr. Dooley took umbrage with Roosevelt’s actions provided an opportunity for the president to be self-effacingly humbled, yet another way to win favor with the masses. Some historians apply a more duplicitous motivation to Roosevelt’s actions. Charles Fanning describes Roosevelt’s “long campaign to disarm Mr. Dooley by proffering friendship,” and early Dunne biographer, Elmer Ellis claims Roosevelt “feared the scourge of princes, Mr. Dooley.”76 Defining Mr. Dooley as such, and as a character that a president would fear attests to Dunne’s considerable influence on the American people as comedy began to take its place as an effective political tool in the early part of the 20th century.

Whether their association was motivated by fair or foul benefits, the result was a modern political comedian for a modern state of politics. Long before the concept of political spin, Roosevelt recognized the participatory nature of political comedy and Dunne provided a way in. The creation of a wise fool in Mr. Dooley gave Dunne an outlet for commentary, the American people insight and a perceived voice, and the President the ability to dismiss that commentary as only a witticism if it was perceived as too scathing. Further, the President’s assumed friendly association with a skeptical immigrant paints him as a reasonable, inclusive, and egalitarian leader.

Finley Peter Dunne and Theodore Roosevelt exemplify the best of what can exist between comedy and politics. The American people benefitted from this pragmatic balance in two prominent ways. Dunne’s willingness to engage both Roosevelt’s politics and his personality provided average Americans with a more comprehensive and humanizing understanding of their president. This clarity was a beneficial change over

76 Fanning, Finley Peter Dunne & Mr. Dooley, 212. Elmer Ellis, Mr. Dooley’s America, 204.
the relatively monarchical reverence applied to 19th century presidents. A second advantage of Dunne’s work was his willingness to tap into and express the feelings of average, and even lower class Americans. He gave them a voice that not only said what they were thinking, but sounded like them too. Mr. Dooley legitimized the role of the disenfranchised immigrant in American society and political influence. When Roosevelt courted the favor of Mr. Dooley, he was proving the value of countless Irishmen, who in turn represented untold numbers of typically subjugated races, cultures, and classes. Dunne used his influence to bridge the gap between these Americans and their president and set the stage for the bond between comedy and politics.
Chapter Two
The Friendship—Will Rogers

The number of similarities between political columnist, Finley Peter Dunne and the early 20th century’s most famous political funnyman, Will Rogers, is striking. As a Cherokee Indian, Will Rogers was also born into an ethnic community somewhat ostracized and set apart from the average American. Like Dunne, Rogers was also a member of a solidly middle class, well-respected family within that community. Both men drew upon their ethnicity as a grounding characteristic within their broader world experience, yet neither of them embraced an out-sider or under-dog perspective. They were both born into large, loving, hard-working families. Both men were parented by civic minded fathers and intelligent, well-read mothers who died when the future pundits were in their teens. Both comedians held a disdain for education but enjoyed reading and writing from a very early age.77

Dunne and Rogers both created characters based upon the types of individuals that had populated the landscape of their early lives. In this aspect, differences between the two men emerge in degrees. A clear delineation between Dunne and the character of Mr. Dooley existed; however, Will Rogers the man and Will Rogers the celebrity were far more difficult to distinguish. Early biographer, friend, and screenwriter of Rogers’ 1926 movie, They Had to See Paris, Homer Croy explained that Rogers, “built himself up till he became, both on and off the stage, the Will Rogers the public knew.”78 In a sense, the Will Rogers the public came to know was a parody of Will Rogers the man,

with the image he projected being an amalgam of his own personality, in addition to influences from his youth.

The honing of Rogers stage presence goes back to the roots of a young man born, William Penn Adair Rogers, in the autumn of 1879 on verdant pastureland overlooking the Verdigris River in Cherokee Country, Oklahoma. Parents Clem and Mary Rogers were both five-sixteenths Cherokee. The Cherokee propensity to model the behaviors of a republican form of government, education, and slave owning, did not protect Cherokees from the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee from relocation by the United States government in the 1830s. This relocation was part of living memory when Rogers was born. Clem was born into a certain amount of status as the child of one of the “Old Settlers” that had come early to the land set aside for Indians, while Mary’s family had crossed into the territory during the Trail of Tears. These newcomers were perceived as a lower class. This unofficial caste system produced union akin to class intermarriage.79

Biographer Ben Yagoda explains that mixed-race individuals, within Cherokee culture held a certain position of prestige. The children of mixed-race backgrounds maintained their full Cherokee citizenship, even though they dressed like, spoke like, and took the names of white men. Their grasp of Euro-American language and customs made them ideal mediators with “one foot in each camp.” Yagoda further argues that this background provided Rogers with a “dual consciousness” that made him ideally suited to stand between the American public and the American political leaders with equal parts home-spun bonhomie and common sense wisdom.80

80 Yagoda, Will Rogers: A Biography, xii.
Will, Clem and Mary’s eighth child, was a reluctant student who preferred working the ranch, spending endless hours riding and roping. In 1893, young Rogers’ path could have crossed that of Dunne, when the recently-widowed Clem took his newly-motherless son on a trip to Chicago to see Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show at the Columbian Exposition. The source of Rogers’ fascination on this trip was Mexican vaquero and roping champion, Vincente Oropeza. Rogers was fascinated with Oropeza’s elaborate rope tricks including his famous “umbrella” trick where one horse would go through the large loop of his rope and a second horse would be caught by the same lasso. Rogers had already earned a reputation as a class clown, and the practice of his new rope tricks were a renewed source of consternation for his teachers. After dropping out of school, Rogers spent most of his time moving cattle and participating in roping contests, to the point that his father feared, “Willie ain’t never goin to amount to nothin.”

The young cowboy convinced a friend to join him on an adventure to Argentina, by way of Europe, to look for work on cattle ranches there in 1902. After several months and several emergency wires of funds from his father to keep him barely afloat, Rogers got a job traveling with a shipment of cattle to South Africa. During these difficult days his first published writings appeared in the local newspaper when his sisters edited his


humorous letters home and submitted them to the editor. On the subject of British money exchange, Rogers wrote:

> Every time we eat or get anything they speal (*sic*) out what it is worth, I just hand them a pound, that is all I know, which is about five spot over there, and trust to the Lord that they will take pity on me and do me half right. Anyway, they’ll hand me back a double hand full of something and strut off. I have got enough money in *bulk* to start in some kind of business. But when I count it (or if some one else did) there would not be enough there to make the first payment on a soda cracker.\(^{83}\)

Even in these early dispatches we see the homespun humor at the little details of life that earmarked Rogers’ later style as a humorist.

While in South Africa, fortune smiled on Rogers when he met up with Texas Jack’s Wild West Show. When Texas Jack witnessed Rogers’ roping ability, he immediately gave him a job and renamed him the “Cherokee Kid”. Yagoda argues that this atmosphere provided Rogers with the “controlled fraternal nomadism” that he desired after so many cattle drives back home.\(^{84}\) Upon return to the United States, Rogers quickly took up with another cowboy show set to appear in St. Louis during the run of the World’s Fair in 1904. Based on Rogers’ skill and showmanship, Texas Jack suggested that Rogers take his talent to the vaudeville stage. Rogers did just that, working his way first from an appearance at a burlesque show in St. Louis that provided him with the manager’s recommendation, to the Chicago Opera House, where he worked as an opening “dumb act”, not requiring an audience’s ear, as they noisily take to their seats.\(^{85}\)

\(^{83}\) Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography*, 52.


Will Rogers came of age as a performer at the best of possible times for his unique blend of talents. Growing industrialization had brought more people off the farms and into the cities in order to make a living wage. With more and more workers gaining an eight hour work day, leisure time became the companion of labor. As Pete Robinson points out, “Americans struggled to reconcile the contrast between their future as a predominantly urban, industrial society and their mythic past as a rural, agrarian one.”

Entertainments that harkened to an imagined past of cowboys and Indians and wide open ranges were increasingly popular. As a cowboy and Native American, Will Rogers truly embodied these grand and illusory pastoral values. Vaudeville became the affordable venue for entertainment and escapism, however, it also provided an outlet for Americans to feel empowered in creating their own American identity.

Will Rogers was uniquely suited to fit that bill. He performed difficult tricks with skill, but always with tremendous modesty. His trademark style was easy and self-effacing. A New York reviewer stated: “He has a foolish, self-conscious laugh and an extemporizing way of discussing…the show that makes the audience feel that it is being let into the inner secrets.” Rogers continued this inclusive way of communicating with his audience even when the topics morphed from a vaudeville stage to the political stage. His stage patter was used to give explanation for some tricks or to explain their difficulty. Rogers planned lists of one-liners if tricks failed: “6. What did old [illegible] say, “There is hope.” Well we are all chock full of hope – if there was a little better Roping and less

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86 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 60.

hoping we would all get out of here early tonight.”

Although tricks did not fail often, when Rogers added humor, audiences loved his act even more.

Vaudeville proved a boon for Will Rogers. He worked furiously and made a very good wage, making it possible to marry Betty Blake, a small town beauty from Arkansas, whom he had been courting for many years. They wasted no time starting a family, keeping Rogers ever mindful of his need to secure the families future; however, by 1910, smaller vaudeville houses across the country began conversion to cinemas, leaving fewer venues for live performance. Yagoda points out that part of Rogers’ “paradox was that along with the old time values, he was opportunistic and prescient enough to embrace, as well, the brand-new mass-culture media.”

Rogers secured his fortune and popularity when he exited the shrinking vaudeville circuit and went to work for Florenz Zeigfield, Jr. as a headliner of the Zeigfield Midnight Frolic, appearing on the rooftop garden of the New Amsterdam Theatre on Broadway. This production was a smaller version of Ziegfeld's Follies, an elaborate variety show that appeared in the larger theatre downstairs. In an unfortunate turn for Rogers, audiences of the Frolic were not as enamored of Will Rogers, and neither was Zeigfield. Where the Follies appealed to tourists, the Frolic welcomed a more rarified crowd of repeat customers such as Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and William Randolph Hearst. The lack of variety in Rogers act made it repetitive for this crowd of locals. The producer was ready to fire the cowboy when Zeigfield collaborator, Gene Buck spoke with Rogers

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88 Yagoda, Will Rogers: A Biography, 94.

89 Yagoda, Will Rogers: A Biography, xiii.
about the problem. Rogers took his wife’s suggestion to talk about the news in the papers in order to add variety. Buck thought this might work.

Through this simple act of economic survival, a political humorist was born. Rogers did not have an agenda, or a particular message to impart. He was first and foremost an entertainer. He chose to use current political news as fodder for his act because it provided him with daily fresh material, regardless of the town he played in. Rogers was not a fiery satirist. His early approach to political humor was no more controversial in tone than a political chat two strangers might have in a barber shop, although Rogers provided a humorous spin. In an article in American Magazine in 1919, Rogers commented that congress was “funnier three hundred and sixty-five days a year than anything I ever heard of.” Rogers’s success and longevity as a humorist is easily attributed to his ability to be observational and not evangelical in his approach to politics. His parody was not shtick but only an intensified stage version of his homespun personality. Where later satirists like Mort Sahl would approach a topic with fiery invective, Rogers’ satire was subtle, making him a favorite of the public and politicians alike.

Roger’s first contact with the White House came long before his patented political banter, when he was invited to entertain President Teddy Roosevelt’s children with rope tricks during a layover in Washington. However, it was not until the Wilson administration that Rogers had his first presidential audience. In 1916, President

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Woodrow Wilson and his new wife, Edith traveled to the Baltimore Friars Club to see Roger’s in the *Friars Frolic*. Rogers made the choice to add several jokes to his act that were at Wilson’s expense. This was, perhaps the first time that a President personally witnessed his political struggles turned into comedy. The polarizing issue of the day was Pancho Villa’s raid in New Mexico, including the execution of American citizens. Wilson had sent General “Black Jack” Pershing on an unsuccessful mission to capture Villa.⁹²

Rogers gathered his nerve and came out with the line "I see where they have captured [Pancho] Villa. Yes, they got him in the morning editions and then the afternoon ones let him get away."⁹³ There was a palpable, collective intake of breath as the audience waited for the president’s reaction. They were soon rewarded with Wilson’s hearty laughter. After the performance, Wilson responded to host George M. Cohen’s comment about the car trip the president’s entourage had to make in order to attend by saying, "I'd travel ten times that distance to listen to a man as wise as Will Rogers."⁹⁴ Robinson argues that this event marked the “moment when humor and live performance joined to herald a profound shift in the relationship between the American people and the presidency.”⁹⁵

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This event exhibits the relationship of one man as the elected representative of the country and the other as an emotional representative of the country, meeting over a shared concern for the country and the events that affect her people, and finding a depressurization and common accord through humor. The third, key element in this exchange, is the public that witnessed and participated in this sociopolitical communion. Rogers, “modeled for Americans how to negotiate the complex tension between worshipping their leaders and vilifying them.”96 In his homey, regular guy way, he showed elected officials as sometimes flawed, sometimes foolish, but still worthy of respectful consideration. This attitude not only gave Americans a voice, it released the pressure that built up when they were unable or unsure how to use that voice.

By 1922, Rogers had both a weekly column, and shorter “daily telegrams” in syndicated publications nationwide. He also participated in a radio show as an off shoot of his Follies appearances. In this capacity, Rogers quickly became a humorous liaison between the American people and the presidency. Unfortunately, the Harding administration was not nearly as adept at realizing the benefits of cultivating a relationship with Rogers as the Wilson administration. In the midst of a brewing scandal about financial improprieties, a small fire broke out in the Treasury Department. Rogers commented, “The fire started on the roof and burned down and down until it got to the place where the money ought to be and it stopped [for lack of fuel]. The Harding administration had beat the fire to it.”97 Rogers went on to comment that he did not

96 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 66.

97 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 71.
believe a “big man” would take offense at his comments, in effect putting the president on notice.

From 1920, until his death in 1935, Rogers provided regular color commentary of both the Republican and Democratic Presidential Conventions. He offered the American public insight into the machinations of political maneuvering with a folksy bemusement that reminded them to take it all with a grain of salt. Rogers observed, “Our national conventions, are nothing but glorified Mickey Mouse cartoons, and are solely for amusement purposes.”

Although Rogers built friendships with many politicians, he eschewed the folly and waste that accompanied much of the political process.

During the 1928 Democratic Convention in Houston, Rogers reproached delegates for the tempest in a whiskey glass on the topic of prohibition, stating, “The whole talk down here is wet and dry; the delegates just can’t wait till the next bottle is opened to discuss it,” Although Rogers was not a drinker, he was staunchly against prohibition. The topic took the brunt of many of his comical tirades:

See where Mr. [William] McAdoo [Wilson’s former Secretary of Treasury] made a prohibition address to a graduation class down in Tennessee. It’s too late to preach prohibition to them when they are graduating. It’s when they go into long pants and short dresses that’s the time to get at em.

White argues that Rogers commitment to this issue set him apart as a columnist that “most resonated with the millions of middle-class and poorer-educated Americans” who

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99 Russell, “Will Rogers”.

would vote to repeal the measure in 1933. Rogers’ rallying cries called for common sense, fairness, and transparency that Americans began to see as their political right.

Rogers recognized his emerging influence and held it as almost a sacred trust. Although he regularly joked at presidential expense, misleading the American people was not a line he was comfortable crossing. In a January 1928 radio performance, Rogers announced that he had a special guest in the studio and then promptly addressed his millions of listeners as President Calvin Coolidge:

I am proud to report that the country as a whole is prosperous. I don’t mean by that that the whole country is prosperous, but, as a whole it is prosperous. That is, it is prosperous for a whole. A whole is not supposed to be prosperous. There is not a lot of doubt about that.

His speech went on in this vein and the next day he received word from his New York Times publisher, Adolph Ochs that he must clarify any misconception because people believed it was President Coolidge speaking. Rogers was horrified to think he had been disingenuous with his listeners or embarrassed the President, with whom he had developed a cordial relationship. Rogers realized that, even in the name of entertainment, there were lines that should not be crossed. This is certainly true in the genre of political humor that so has the ability to effect the public’s perception.

Previously, in 1926, The Saturday Evening Post publisher, George Horace Lorimer encouraged Rogers and his family to embark on a five month European tour. Rogers was paid $2000 per article for dispatches from this trip. The title of the series was “Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President”. Rogers sat in on Parliament, met

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Edward VIII the Prince of Wales and Mussolini, but fell short in his attempt to speak with Leon Trotsky. President Coolidge did not sanction the trip but he recognized its benefit enough to debrief his informal “ambassador” at the White House upon his return. Rogers astutely reported to Coolidge of the Prince, who would later abdicate the throne: “he don’t care anymore about being King than you would going back to vice-president again.” Rogers referred to Mussolini as a “regular guy”, a description Il Duce embraced. Through these articles, average Americans felt the same normalizing influence that Rogers brought to American politics, expanded to national politics.

Rogers fancied himself a quasi-reporter and ambassador and he did not want this current expression of radio parody to alienate Coolidge. Rogers sent a contrite letter of apology. In turn, Coolidge sent a letter to Rogers on January 11, recognizing the address as a “harmless amusement” and recognizing “how nicely you have referred to me so many times.” This telling missive makes it clear that as much as any president might want to minimize Rogers’ impact, it was important to recognize the great influence he held on the American people.

Rogers’ playful interaction with these men broke down “what had been to this point the traditionally somber and aloof institution of the presidency.” Rogers inadvertently began laying the groundwork for a modern presidency that requires a presidential candidate to curry favor with the American people through their interaction

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104 Yagoda, Will Rogers: A Biography, 231.
105 Rogers, The Papers of Will Rogers, 523.
106 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 71.
with comics that reflect the image of that people. Presidents showed a willingness to be responsive to a comic so considerate and mild-mannered, but a precedent was being set that would require the same consideration from politicians facing more confrontational satirists in the future.

During the presidency of Herbert Hoover, Will Rogers crossed another kind of line in the use of his name and reputation to support a specific presidential agenda. In his prior role as Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover had “overseen the introduction and regulation of radio” and appreciated its potential to mold public opinion. As President in the midst of the Great Depression, Hoover chose to call upon the nation’s biggest celebrity, Will Rogers, to join him on a nationwide broadcast to promote the President’s Organization on Unemployment Relief (POUR). Rogers gave the “Bacon, Beans and Limousines” speech on October 18, 1931:

So I looked into Mr. Hoover's record and inquired of everybody, and after I had kind of thrown out about two-thirds of what the Democrats said about him why I figured that I wouldn't have much to lose by appearing with Mr. Hoover...So here we are in a country with more wheat and more corn and more money in the bank, more cotton, more everything in the world...and yet we’ve got people starved. We'll hold the distinction of being the only nation in the history of the world that ever went to the poor house in an automobile...These people that you're asked to aid, why they're not asking for charity, they are naturally asking for a job, but if you can't give 'em a job why the next best thing you can do is see that they have food and the necessities of life...Now I think that every town and every city will raise this money. In fact, they can't afford not to. They've got the money because there's as much money in the country as there ever was. Only fewer people have it, but it's there...I know that this subject is very dear to Mr. Hoover's heart...and if every town and every city will get out and raise their quota, what they need for this winter, why it'll make him a very happy man, and happiness hasn't been a

\[107\] Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 76.
steady diet with our president. He's had a very tough, uphill fight, and this will make him feel very good. He's a very human man. I thank you. Good night.\textsuperscript{108}

Rogers support on this occasion, although futile in the face of Hoover’s nonexistent recovery efforts, was altogether in character. Rogers’ interest was in bolstering the suffering American people, but comedy that marries itself too closely to politics proves false and ineffectual with a struggling audience.

It is interesting to note that this instance exemplifies the limits of the relationship between comedy and politics, and their combined ability to influence or placate the American public. Will Rogers developed a trusted reputation as an American everyman. He was able to stay abreast of the actions of the players in Washington due to his enhanced proximity and cordial relationships with these men of power. For the President, a spokesman and ally like Will Rogers would seem priceless in an effort to calm and reassure the masses. The third player in this triad is the public and it is the most mercurial and powerful of the three.

The influence of these two balancing forces, comedy and politics, could not supersede the very real suffering of the American people. The POUR initiatives were inadequate and discontinued by the following spring.\textsuperscript{109} The public seeks kinship and common understanding from political comedians, a voice to vent for them and point out political irony. When comedians become cheerleaders for a particular political cause,


they risk a loss of credibility. In this instance, Rogers fell back on a somewhat distancing discourse within the speech itself and his immense popularity in order to avoid a loss of faith from his audience.

This incident highlights the limitations of a collaborative between comedy and politics to influence the attitudes of individual Americans. This balance and sway was most strongly felt within Rogers final presidential pairing with Franklin Roosevelt. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Will Rogers was far more known and trusted than the man who would become one of the most beloved presidents in the nation’s history. Prior to his run for president in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was not widely known outside of his party or his New York constituency, and even these supporters were not fully convinced of his ability to turn around a country in grave crisis. Rogers first noted Roosevelt’s leadership potential when the future president made a long-winded nominating speech for Alfred E. Smith at the 1924 Democratic convention. Rogers credited Roosevelt with a rousing “ten page…Man I am about to name speech.”

In a Daily Telegram on November 5, 1930, Rogers conjured a bit of political prophecy, “The Democrats nominated their president yesterday, Franklin D. Roosevelt.” Rogers recognized that the newly reelected New York Governor, had proven his strength and competency to his party and would be the obvious Democratic


front runner in the 1932 election. The two men were the perfect candidates to solidify the long building relationship between comedy and politics. Franklin Roosevelt came onto the American political stage at a time of desperation and need for change, and he hoped to provide that change. The future president’s aid and works programs became a balm after Hoover’s laissez faire approach to economic recovery. Despite his celebrity status, Rogers was also one of those Americans hoping for change.

Roosevelt needed Rogers. Roosevelt understood Rogers’ relevance and courted his favor early. In April of 1931, the governor sent Rogers a letter complimenting a recent film role and inviting him to stop in to the Big Apple for a visit. He implored Rogers to “come and talk to me of cabbages and Kings! I want to see you, oh most excellent of philosophers!” Will Rogers must have certainly recognized the motivation behind FDR’s effusiveness, but he also saw the potential in the candidate to be open to a discourse that would allow him proximity and influence that Rogers valued as a representative of the people.

The first public appearance in this partnership was in September of 1932, during the Motion Picture Electrical Parade and Sports Pageant. The yearly Hollywood event, organized by studio boss, Jack Warner, was one of the many stops on FDR’s campaign trail. Rogers introduced the candidate, praising his “high type of manhood”. It is possible that Rogers was using his praise to obfuscate the candidates physical infirmities,  

113 White, *Will Rogers*, 213.  
or that Rogers recognized the same powerful bearing in Franklin Roosevelt, that Finley Dunne had known in his cousin Teddy. Either way, this was high praise indeed for an up and coming candidate from the man that William R. Brown claims was “the embodiment of the American Dream”\(^{116}\) and therefore particularly qualified to provide a seal of approval.

Katherine Cramer Brownell points out that Roosevelt was attempting to restructure the executive branch of the government as a “key source of employment, hope and inspiration during the stressful years of depression.”\(^{117}\) Studio executives hoped to avoid accusations of “lavish Hollywood practices during an era of economic distress.”\(^{118}\)

The excessive spectacle of the Parade and Pageant could discount either of these goals. Will Rogers stood at the crossroads of these concerns, adding a reasonable element to an extravagant display and backing to an expectant potential president. Throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, Rogers was by far the political humorist with the most longevity, he was also most obliging toward the White House in the timbre and tone of his satire. His mild manner may not have provided a biting contrast to the political events of the day, but it is reflective of the desire of the American people to be bolstered in their hope for the country after the dark days of the depression. Moreover, Rogers’ continuous presence as an oracle firmly established this role for comedians to come.

Rogers had taken a mock run at the presidency in 1928, at the bequest of Life Magazine. The stunt provided great excitement for weekly articles in the magazine.

\(^{116}\) White, Will Rogers, xxi.

\(^{117}\) Brownell, Showbiz Politics.

\(^{118}\) Brownell, Showbiz Politics.
Rogers dubbed himself the bunkless candidate of the Anti-Bunk Party and agreed to step down as soon as he was elected. His candidacy was nothing more than a media gimmick, but it did provide Rogers with the opportunity to remind politicians of the need for an honest and forthright campaign. The fervor around this event inspired some talk about a real candidacy for Rogers. *Life Magazine* was “besieged by a large number of persons desirous of voting for Rogers and anxious to find out how to do it.”

To Roosevelt’s chagrin, this talk continued during the 1932 election. Several weeks before the convention, Roosevelt sent word to Rogers to make sure there was no truth to the rumors of his run for president, saying “I know you won’t get mixed in any fool movement to make the good old donkey chase his own tail.” Despite the burgeoning friendship between the two men, and despite the fact that FDR was a confirmed politician and Rogers was a celebrated performer, the tone makes it clear that Roosevelt was nervous. How could any authentic candidate hope to run against a beloved American icon, who was only running in jest? The blurred lines between real politics and political comedy are at times a distraction to the actual political process.

Roosevelt’s concerns were for naught when he won the 1932 election to become the 32nd President of the United States. Within days, Rogers sent the President a heartfelt telegram filled with advice on matters of finance, foreign policy, maintenance of good health, and dealing with Congress. Among other things, Rogers counseled: “With

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120 Van Doren, Will Rogers.

121 White, *Will Rogers*, xix.
Congress and the Senate, don't scold 'em. They are just children that's never grown up. They don't like to be corrected in company. Don't send messages to 'em, send candy.”

Rogers’ words, while encouraging the Commander and Chief to take charge, show condescension for politicians as a whole. There is the sense that Rogers feels in some way responsible to the President and to the American people to see to it that Roosevelt fulfills his promise. It is also interesting that Rogers, a comedian, felt qualified to provide advice to the new President.

In a reinforcement of his hopeful view of the new President, Rogers immediately jumped on the pro-Roosevelt bandwagon, highlighting FDR’s early efforts:

Say, this Roosevelt is a fast worker. Even on Sunday when all a President is supposed to do is put on a silk hat and have his picture taken coming out of a church, why the President closed all the banks and called Congress in extra session, and that’s not all he’s going to call ‘em either, if they don’t get something done.

Rogers’ provided assurance and further built Roosevelt up as the hero and champion of the people by setting Congress as the foe. The two men became warm acquaintances. In the three years prior to his death in 1935, Rogers made seven trips to the Roosevelt Whitehouse for lunches, teas, and overnight stays and even spent time with Roosevelt in Hawaii while the President and his family vacationed there.

Although there was no calculated plan on Rogers’ part, some of Roosevelt’s fireside chats inadvertently became a joint venture between the two men. The President

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122 White, Will Rogers, 232.


124 White, Will Rogers, 255.
would have NBC call and read transcripts of Rogers show to his secretary who would take them down in shorthand before his fireside chats. Armed with the sentiment that Rogers stressed to his audience, Roosevelt was better prepared to reinforce salient points he could use to his advantage. At the very least, Roosevelt must certainly have appreciated the warmed up audience that a convivial and supportive Rogers provided for him.125

As this cooperative trend continued, a *Ft. Worth Star Telegram* reporter called Rogers out during a Texas broadcast of the Good Gulf Show, stating, “some people are wondering if the President is writing your speeches or if you are writing the President’s speeches.”126 Rogers assured him neither was the case but the two were like minded. Rogers had always been on the outside of politics, at the fringes, the pragmatically critical citizen, holding excess and political folly up to the light, but White argues that by 1932 Rogers was “swept up” with the political process and could “no longer remain an impartial observer.”127 White overlooks Rogers willing criticism of Roosevelt’s disinterest in balancing the budget:

> They [Congress] have given him [President Roosevelt] every power from mayhem to manslaughter, but if he starts asking for the sole and exclusive right to deal with this debt thing he’s going to ride his horse under the first limb he has hit.128

And on May 22nd:

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125 White, *Will Rogers*, 236.


The phenomenal popularity of the Roosevelt administration now meets its severest test. They are starting to decide where all the money they have been appropriating will come from.\textsuperscript{129}

When Roosevelt sent warships to Cuba during a brief revolution there, Rogers balked:

\begin{quote}
Now look out Democratic administration…You are telling some Latin American country who can be President and who can’t? I don’t care how little your country is, you got a right to run it like you want. When the big nations quite meddling then the world will have peace.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

This kinship did not, therefore; supplant Rogers’ ongoing dialogue with the American people or his sense of responsibility to be forthright in that communication.

In his purest role as a comedian, Will Rogers entertained the American people. In his more complex roles, he represented and guided them. Rogers, “encouraged Americans to employ humor to do the serious work of democracy, and he challenged the presidency to keep up.”\textsuperscript{131} Politicians who were shrewd recognized and appreciated this dual responsibility. Roosevelt was certainly shrewd enough to know that being aligned with and accepted by Rogers could help portray him in a positive light. Roosevelt also appreciated the assurance he received from Rogers. Will Rogers was not only a representative for the American people but a representative of the American people. If Roosevelt held the approval of Rogers, he could feel confident that he held the respect and agreement of the American people. In 1938, Roosevelt said, “In a time grown too solemn and sober, he brought his countrymen back to proportion.”\textsuperscript{132}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[129] Will Rogers, Daily Telegram, Vol. 4, May 22, 1933, #2121 “Mr. Rogers Thinks the Big Test for the President is at Hand.” WillRogers.com (accessed Dec, 15, 2014).
\item[131] Robinson, \textit{The Dance of the Comedians}, 57.
\end{footnotes}
therefore, currying favor with Rogers simply to gain his support and influence, but seeking his approval as a single representative of a massive faceless constituency.

Richard D. White classifies Rogers as “a true political insider with the power to shape public opinion and ultimately influence public policy.”\textsuperscript{133} Although this is a broad over statement, Rogers, along with Roosevelt, did have a unique and powerful role to play. This was possibly the last time in the nation’s history where the symbiotic relationship between comedy and politics was embodied so purely by two such iconic individuals. After this point, many politicians would engage many comedians for support and approval and many comedians would use politicians to hone a routine and build a reputation. Friendships would result and the entire relationship between comedy and politics would solidify, expand, and become part of the American 20\textsuperscript{th} century zeitgeist, but the enterprise would never again be represented by two such larger than life characters.

\textsuperscript{133} White, Will Rogers, xix.
Franklin Roosevelt and Will Rogers were prolific representatives of both politics and comedy, respectively. Together, they long represented the solidified relationship between politics and comedy. After World War II, however, the national stage and the performance stage both expanded to include new forms of political commentary and comedy. Biting satiric comedy became the response to the rapid changes in American society. Political comedians were no longer working with, but seemingly working against political figures. This adjustment in material and approach was in response to the overall mood of their audience. There were a myriad of factors that changed society, therefore changing the public’s demand in comedic faire.

Allison Dagnes states that “the point of satire is to differentiate between what is and what should be.”134 In the post war 1950s and early volatility of the 1960s much in society was not as it appeared to be. With memories of depression and war still impressed upon their psyches, some Americans in the 1950s embraced economic prosperity, the mobility of the automobile age, and clean new suburbs as their due reward. But the Leave It to Beaver idealism of the Eisenhower Era frayed around the edges for some Americans. With new opportunity came the reality that these opportunities were not available across the board. African-Americans who helped to win the war abroad still held second class status. Women who helped to win the war at home were suddenly displaced. Also at home, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s pursuit of communist sympathizers kept Americans on

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edge. Conflict in worldwide political relationships began a cold war era that also beget a continual sense of uneasiness in daily life. Village Voice cartoonist Jules Feiffer stated, “If you were in your mid-twenties back in the fifties and living in an urban center, you felt generally unspoken for.” Frustration bubbled forward and laughter was a release. Laughter was also a way to communicate these frustrations. Young comedians stepped into the breach, modifying recognized comic styling in order to express the attitude of the public.

In the early days after World War II, in every form of media and entertainment, a wellspring of antiestablishmentarianism poured forth. The precursors to comic satirist’s onstage were print and radio, and perhaps the first satirical comedy to combat the consensus of postwar America was MAD Magazine, which started as a comic book in 1952. Under the guidance of editor, Harvey Kurtzman and publisher, William Gaines, MAD morphed into a magazine two years later to combat the newly created government CCA (Comic Code Authority) that was to police decency in comic books. The comic magazine displayed satirical commentary on politics, entertainment, and the emerging consumer culture. A January 1958 issue described modern Christmas toys that included a junior atomic scientist kit, where a child can recruit his friends to “test the range of his first blast”; and a junior reporter-informer kit for kids who want to play “Congressional Investigation.” Mad Magazine came early and stayed consistent to the satirical party. A

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137 George Gobel, “Mad’s Xmas Toys”, Mad Magazine (January 195, No 37) 6.
December 1974 issue features a Nixon-Agnew parody of the popular 1970s movie, The Sting.\(^{138}\)

Cartoonist’s Herblock and Walt Kelly had been patriotic cartoonists during the war. The new atmosphere of social and political discord prompted them to create cartoons portraying liberal attacks on the Cold War, Eisenhower, and Foreign Policy. According to Kercher, Kelly “viewed cartooning as a species of news reporting,” and used his comic strip character, Pogo as a conscientious voice.\(^{139}\) A striking example of Herblock’s satiric cartoons was “Here He Comes Now”, published in 1954. The cartoon shows then Senator Nixon crawling out of a sewer as he crisscrosses the country on his anti-communist campaign.\(^{140}\) Herblock dubbed this period the “Era of Feeling Numb”, and Kelly called for the “cleansing lash of humor.”\(^{141}\) Both men tapped into the bubbling discord in American society.

On the radio, satirist Stan Freeberg burned up the air waves. He had gained initial success with charming ditties and song parodies like, the Christmas classic The Night Before Christmas/Nuttin’ for Christmas. Over time, his songs and show became far more political, criticizing rampant consumer culture and foreign policy. One such example is an episode of Freberg’s radio show entitled “The Incident at Los Voraces,” in which competing casinos El Sodom and Rancho Gomorrah top each other with one gaining the


\(^{139}\) Kercher, Revel with a Cause, 59.


\(^{141}\) Kercher, Revel with a Cause, 77, 57.
rights to stage the 1960 Presidential Inauguration (twice a day for a ten-week run); and the other opening the Gaza Strip in the Suez ballroom, both acts complete with songs and showgirls. The entire event explodes with a hydrogen bomb blast. Topics that had been gently and jovially bantered about in earlier days, such as politics and foreign policy, were now expressed with anger and edge. What started on the page and radio, soon leapt onto the stage to create a more reciprocal interaction between performers and the public.

Stephen E Kercher explains that, on stage, satirical improvisers started in Chicago in 1955 with the Compass Players, made up of a group of students from the University of Chicago. David Shepard created the Compass Players, a forerunner of the current improvisation troupe, Second City. Shepard partnered with Paul Sills, in a desire to bring social commentary to public performance. Sills had been heavily influenced by his mother, Viola Spolin, who created the improvisational theatre games for primary education that have morphed into the improvisational theatre of today. They were joined by a talented group of left leaning performers including Elaine May, Mike Nichols, Severn Darden, and Shelley Berman.

The Compass Players used improvised scenarios based on audience suggestions and prompts from the newspaper to exhibit how comedy performance can be a form of expression against the malaise of middle-class consensus culture. David Shepard explains some of the skits performed by the players:

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Blind dates. That’s American-blind dates. Used car salesman - that’s American we did that one. Veterans coming back from the war - we did that. The conflict between middle-class and working-class values, expressed in the bars of Cicero. The hypocrisy of the ministry - we did that. Every one of those little scenarios are in some way an exploration of the American value system… we did our tour of Hollywood and we did our tour to Joe McCarthy - we really tried to do just about everything.144

Through improvisational comedy, the values expressed were very literally in the hands of the audience. As a result, the audience developed an expectation for satisfaction of frustrations in other forms of entertainment.

On the West coast, stand-up comedians like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory spread the same spirit and thrived in the counter-culture atmosphere of San Francisco and Berkley California. Although they did not take suggestions from the audience, they each tapped into some bit of the American zeitgeist. According to Wagg, comedians like Sahl and Gregory confronted politicians more directly and questioned how they did their jobs, recognizing that to “reduce the President to his golf handicap was effectively to depoliticize him.”145 African-American comedian, Gregory faced the new world head-on when performing successfully, at the Playboy Club, before a group of white southern conventioneers in 1961. He began his act by acknowledging his southern audience and saying, “I know the South very well. I spent twenty years there one night.”146

It would seem that this new volatility in performance would reference a breakdown in the relationship between comedy and politics; on the contrary, these changes

144 Sweet, Something Wonderful Right Away, 7.
145 Wagg, 256
expressed the responsive adaptation of comedy to the concerns of Americans, therefore providing a voice and a venting of anxieties and frustrations. Individuals that embraced a new political awareness through protests and demonstration were also drawn to the confrontational tone of modern satire. This very process maintained the line of communication between comedy and politics, even while it democratized that connection to the American public more generally, rather than just to elite politicians. This era of liberal satire was not the beginning, pinnacle, or end of political comedy; it was only a step on the path that connects the American people to its government, through the format of comedy.

The seemingly moribund state of parody in political humor can be further disproved through an examination of the path taken by one of the most zealous political satirists of the 50s and 60s. In considering Mort Sahl’s success as a comedic counter culture poster child and the eventual downward trajectory of his career, we see the persevering relationship between comedy and politics despite the heated tone of political satire from the late fifties to early seventies. Sahl was originally on the cutting edge in voicing the concerns of upper middle-class American culture, but despite his close relationship to politics and politicians, he failed to recognize change and adapt when the shift back to lighter topical humor occurred.

Mort Sahl was born in 1927 in Montreal, Quebec to American parents. He shares similarities with Rogers and Dunne in three distinct ways. Like the previous wits, Sahl was raised in a middle class household. His father worked as a court clerk and court reporter in Los Angeles, California, where Sahl was raised. Additionally, like Dunne and Rogers, Sahl was reared in a politically aware family. Sahl states in his autobiography,
“My father and mother gave me a very radical orientation. They are people who refused to watch America turn 180 degrees after FDR.”

After high school, Sahl completed a tour of duty in the service in Alaska. Upon his return, he intended to follow his father into civil service after receiving a degree in engineering and city management from the University of Southern California.

The final similarity the trio shared is a sense of separation from the norm of society. Dunne was a second generation immigrant in a city that looked down on the unwashed masses of refugees; Rogers was an American Indian, carrying the shame of the government’s efforts to institutionalize an entire race within created borders; and Sahl, as a Jewish American, carried the ongoing outsider stigma of a long walk in the desert some 2000 years earlier. Starting in 1950, Sahl tried his luck in Los Angeles nightclubs, earning an average of $46 a year in his new profession, as a comedian. In 1953, well equipped with a predisposition toward leftist politics and frustrated, creative thought, Mort Sahl quit comedy and became a car salesman.

In December of that year Sahl headed to San Francisco, following his paramour, Susan Babior, who was attending college in Berkley, California. With no job and no plans to return to school, Sahl decided to give comedy another try. Comedians of the early 1950s generally wore tuxedos and performed one-liners about a “grotesque mother-in-law, wife’s lousy cooking, or brother-in-laws inability to hold a job. And how about

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these kids today!"\textsuperscript{149} They were equal parts emcee and opening act for singers like Peggy Lee or the Kingston Trio. Susan suggested Sahl try at the hungryi, a popular folk club in San Francisco run by Enrico Banducci. She told him, “The audiences are all intellects, which means if they understand you, great, and if they don’t, they will never admit it because they will think it is whimsical humor.”\textsuperscript{150} He did not own a tuxedo and could not afford to buy one, so he decided a button-up shirt, slacks, and a sweater would make him look like his audience, made up of mostly graduate students from nearby Berkley. Sahl believed that you “mustn’t look like any member of the society you’re criticizing” and he was fully engaged in criticizing the status quo.\textsuperscript{151}

The casual atmosphere of the place also allowed Sahl to dress down his comedic style, incorporating a more conversational approach, creating his signature style of stand-up, even if his political point of view was slower to develop. He stapled notes inside a rolled up newspaper to support his meandering memory while telling rambling stories based on observances in society. Sahl’s casual sweater and newspaper were so out of the norm for comedians of the early 1950s that they became the symbols of his iconoclastic style. More unique than Sahl’s look was his style of comedy filled with digressions and segues that often doubled back on themselves in a rolling conversational pattern punctuated with Sahl’s promise to “get back to that in a minute.”\textsuperscript{152} A 1960 \textit{Time} Magazine article best describes Sahl’s new style:

\textsuperscript{149} Nachman, \textit{Seriously Funny}, 7.
\textsuperscript{150} Sahl, \textit{Heartland}, 12.
\textsuperscript{151} Kercher, \textit{Revel with a Cause}, 204.
\textsuperscript{152} Kercher, \textit{Revel with a Cause}, 205.
He carefully builds deceptively miscellaneous structures of jokes that are like verbal mobiles. He begins with the spine of a subject, then hooks thought onto thought; joke onto dangling joke, many of them totally unrelated to the main theme, till the whole structure spins but somehow balances. All the time he is building toward a final statement, which is too much part of the whole to be called a punch line, but puts that particular theme away forever.\textsuperscript{153}

Sahl let the audience find the punchline, counting on their acclaimed intellect to get them there. A joke Sahl indicated was a favorite of the college crowd was about two bank robbers who walk in to a bank and give a note to the teller, an intellectual who could not find work elsewhere. The note says, “Give us all the money in the bank. Act normal. You will not be harmed.” The teller returns the note with a counternote asking about the word “normal”. He wrote “define your terms.”\textsuperscript{154}

Early comedic acolyte Woody Allen explained, “He was the best thing I ever saw. He was like Charlie Parker in jazz… There was a need for revolution, everybody was ready for the revolution, but some guy had to come along who could perform the revolution and be great…He totally restructured comedy…He changed the rhythm of the jokes.”\textsuperscript{155} It took some time for audiences to catch on, but Banducci enjoyed the acerbic young man and after several months Sahl’s unique new style of comedy merged with a political point of view that the liberal audiences clamored for.

It was not long before the counterculture mood of San Francisco and Berkley inspired Sahl, and his newspapers became more than a prop, as he perused them for fresh material. Sahl proclaims absorbing the atmosphere of youthful, liberal rebellion was “like

\textsuperscript{153} “The Third Campaign”, 3.
\textsuperscript{154} Sahl, \textit{Heartland}, 14.
being born again”, as Berkley was filled with a “cadre of left-wing-oriented Jewish kids” who were “forever talking politics in coffeehouses.” Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. explained the socio-political atmosphere and Sahl’s place in it as:

A mounting restlessness and discontent, an impatience with clichés and platitudes, a resentment against the materialist notion that affluence is the answer to everything, a contempt for banality and corn—in short, a revolt against pomposity. Sahl's popularity is a sign of a yearning for youth, irreverence, trenchancy, satire, a clean break with the past.

Sahl began incorporating more political satire into his act. “If San Francisco was the outpost of comic rebellion, Sahl was the first audible sign that something was brewing in America.”

President Eisenhower was a favorite target for Sahl’s satire. In 1957, Hubert Humphry suggested President Eisenhower should take an African-American student by her hand and escort her into the newly segregated school in Little Rock, Arkansas in response to Governor Faubus’ resistance, instead of calling out of the National Guard. Sahl responded that Eisenhower, an avid golfer, “would have a terrible time deciding how to do it, whether or not to use an overlapping grip.” Sahl’s attacks mirrored the more vocal and dissatisfied members of his ever growing audience, that had grown impatient with weak and half-hearted attempts to expand civil rights.

Red-baiting Senator McCarthy was another favored lamb to slaughter. Sahl explained that McCarthy had called the Army a communist bastion. The Army

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156 Sahl, Heartland, 10-11.
158 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 6.
159 Sahl, Heartland, 15.
“responded by redesigning the Eisenhower jacket. They added a flap that would go over
the mouth and called it the McCarthy jacket.” Sahl defined the Cold War as a system
where “every time the Russians threw an American in jail, The House Un-American
Activities Committee would throw an American in jail to make sure they didn’t get away
with it.” With the increase of Sahl’s political humor came an increase in his celebrity
and reputation.

Herb Caen, a columnist known as Mr. San Francisco, was the longtime oracle for
the city by the bay and became a journalistic patron of Sahl, complementing his exciting
style like “a jazz musician playing a chorus.” Dropping in to the hungryi became
fashionable for Hollywood actors, agents, and politicos. Sahl became good friends with
Paul Newman, Adlai Stevenson, and Hugh Hefner. Hefner was a big supporter of the
irreverent new political comedy started by Sahl. As Gerald Nachman explains, “These
rebel forces were heavily backed by Hugh Hefner, whose Playboy magazine and
nightclub circuit made him a major comedy broker.”

By the end of the 1950s, Sahl’s star was on the rise. He made the rounds
throughout the 1950s and 1960s on a wide variety of talk and variety shows, sometimes
using a chalkboard to graphically map out his hard-hitting, yet humorous theories on
political parties and the range of conservative versus liberal thinking within them.

160 Sahl, Heartland, 21.
161 Sahl, Heartland, 21.
163 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 8.
164 Mort Sahl “explaining politics and war”, Hollywood Palace Variety Show, 1967 (posted
Despite his liberal tone, audiences developed a taste for Sahl’s honest approach to the conflicts they witnessed. As Robinson states “Sahl simply articulated these incongruities for desperate and frightening times.” 165 Sahl accurately read the frustrations and fears of his audience expressing their worst fears and their most irritating distractions through humor. Sahl quipped that “whenever he saw an unidentified aircraft approaching, he never knew whether if it was going to unload a hydrogen bomb or spell out “Pepsi-Cola” in skywriting.” 166

Sahl was featured on the cover of Time Magazine in 1960 and a subsequent article dubbed him, “Will Rogers with fangs.” 167 Where Rogers had been a non-confrontational link between the government and the people, Sahl was the snarling attack dog on the end of a long chain of American concerns. His popularity, despite his polarizing political rebukes, attests to the charged and volatile attitude prevalent in mid-20th century America. Time called him “the freshest comedian around” and “the first notable American political satirist since Will Rogers.” 168 Sahl himself was more resistant to these comparisons. He stated in his autobiography, “Rogers came onstage and impersonated a yokel who was critical of the federal government. And when I come on the stage, I impersonate an intellectual who is critical of the yokels who are running our

165 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 120.

166 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 118.


government.” Dunne used his comedy to open a dialogue between the disenfranchised American citizen and his government; Rogers extended and solidified the reach of that communication; whereas, Sahl chose to be the voice of defiant rebellion in American political discourse.

A young Massachusetts senator, John F. Kennedy, just entering the national political stage in the late 1950s, recognized the power of humor and acknowledged how embracing a more cutting edge attitude could set him apart from the staid Eisenhower White House. “Kennedy was determined to play to the …postwar liberal consensus” that made up Mort Sal’s audience. According to Robinson, Kennedy’s sense of humor was notorious for “its calculated precision as well as its organic spontaneity”; a spontaneity that in reality was aided by a cadre of writers. In 1957, Sahl received a call from Joseph Kennedy, the candidate’s powerful father, asking him to “write some things for Johnny,” such as comical responses and jokes that Kennedy could use to build his dynamic image and provide deflection when necessary on the campaign trail. Sahl’s writings were transferred through Pat Lawford or Pierre Salinger. Though many of Sahl’s offerings were unused, one Sahl was particularly proud of was when Kennedy was asked if he feared upsetting the Pope, he replied, “It’s not the hereafter that’s bothering me, but November 4th (Election Day) is driving me out of my mind.” Kennedy used local humor to curry favor with his audiences. On a Pennsylvania stop he expressed a “kinship to the

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169 Sahl, Heartland, 87.
170 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 128.
171 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 127.
172 Sahl, Heartland, 80.
Pittsburg Pirates. Like my candidacy, they were not given much chance in the spring.”

Almost fatefuly, the Pirates won the World Series in October followed by Kennedy’s victory in November.

Kennedy was not Sahl’s first or closest political friendship. Sahl had first met Adlai Stevenson when he was appearing at Mister Kelly’s in Chicago and the two became fast friends. In the Times interview, Stevenson said of Sahl: "I dote on him.”

Sahl was a longtime Stevenson supporter but transferred his political loyalty to Kennedy after Stevenson pulled out and began stumping for Kennedy. Despite the political affiliation with Stevenson, and almost two years of providing jokes to Kennedy’s campaign, Sahl did not meet the future president until a 1959 political banquet where Sahl was asked to emcee. Sahl claims that his nerves that evening were not over meeting the presidential hopeful, but over remembering what jokes he had given to Jack, so that they would not duplicate each other.

Despite his closeness to the Kennedy campaign, Sahl was an equal opportunity offender. During the campaign, the two best topics for a Kennedy attack were his father’s money and his age. Mort Sahl launched a dual offensive: “After J.F.K. accepted the nomination for president, at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, Sahl claimed that rival Richard Nixon had sent a congratulatory telegram to Joseph Kennedy reading, YOU HAVEN’T LOST A SON, YOU’VE GAINED A COUNTRY.”

Sahl also quipped that “Some

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174 “The Third Campaign”, 2.
175 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 126.
people claim Nixon is trying to sell the country, and Kennedy is trying to buy it.” After the convention, Sahl kept up the heat: “At the Los Angeles convention I had a hunch about how things were going right from the start, when the minister delivered the invocation and said, 'A little child shall lead them.' You know, Kennedy had to have Lyndon Johnson on the ticket with him because he can't get into Washington without an adult.” Sahl claimed the country must be looking for a “son-figure” but recognized Kennedy’s impending win by saying: "I have only a few months to tell these jokes, before they become treason."177

The days of Dunne’s and Roger’s gentle rebukes, masked by mild-mannered characterizations were long gone. Sahl presented a straight-forward, clear frontal attack on politics and personalities alike. After Kennedy took office, Sahl continued his satiric diatribes. Without a field of candidates to gun for, Kennedy became his primary target. Sahl’s manager, Milton Ebbins, also managed Peter Lawford. According to Sahl, Ebbins would report back after dinners with Lawford at the Kennedy compound: “They squeezed me at dinner: the Old Man [Joseph Kennedy] said, “doesn’t Sahl know the meaning of the word loyalty?” Sahl’s response was to do “three times as much material” on Kennedy.178 Sahl suggested in his act that perhaps Jackie Kennedy could take a break from appearing in fashion magazines, and instead relieve the aging Eleanor Roosevelt from the responsibility of “driving tractors to Havana.”179

177 “Will Rogers with Fangs” *Time.*


Despite his campaign-trail aid to the now-president, Sahl was willing to shower the New Frontier with “flaming arrows”. He stated of zealous Attorney General and presidential kin, Bobby Kennedy, "Little Brother is watching you." During a monologue on ABC-TV’s short-lived *Jerry Lewis Show*, “Sahl even jokingly referred to a connection between President Kennedy, mobster Sam Giancana, and the singer Frank Sinatra.”

The Presidents intimates referred to Sahl as “that bastard” with Kennedy adding, but “He’s a smart bastard.”

Robinson asserts that Kennedy “grappled with his response” to satiric material that “endeared him to the public…and yet trivialized the prestige of the imperial presidency, which he staunchly promoted.” Ultimately, Sahl’s refusal to “become a court jester” to Kennedy ostracized him from the White House and the Democratic Party, which considered him a traitor to the president.

Sahl’s somewhat conflicted relationship with the Kennedy White House reflects the ambivalence shared by the American people, or at least Sahl’s “people.”

Liberals seemed to be getting what they wanted; a young liberal democrat charged with the dynamism to drag the country out of its malaise and expect individuals to overcome consumer driven doldrums in order to “ask what you can do for your country.” Could he deliver? Could individuals live up to the call to duty? In this new hyper-aware

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181 Sahl, *Heartland*, 89.


183 Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians*, 140.

184 Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 211.

society, even opportunities weighed heavy. Sahl continued to ground his audience in a hopeful cynicism that took the edge off some of the higher calling of citizenship.

Sahl’s political aggressiveness came at a price. In an example of a strained relationship between comedy and politics, Sahl complained that pressure from Joseph Kennedy started affecting his bookings, driving Sahl into an ever more manic state. This clash is indicative of the American people’s struggles with political changes in the turbulent years of Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. For Sahl, these struggle was more personal. The satirist who was a release valve for the American people showed mounting frustration and bitterness in his peculiar relationship with the commander in chief. Sahl exhibited a defensive tone in an interview only two months before the assassination; referring to his disgust of “Kennedy worshipers” while insisting this was no criticism of Kennedy but of his weak constituents. “If they dub him God, the weakness is that they need a god.”

On November 22, 1963, the country was devastated by the loss of the president, and the loss of all the unanswered questions of hope that remained for the country.

Suddenly, satire seemed like an ill-fitting sweater and Sahl was left floundering to find direction for his potent humor. While hosting a radio show, Sahl interviewed Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who opened a case to refute the Warren Commission, which investigated the assassination of Kennedy. Sahl helped Garrison get interviews with Steve Allen and Johnny Carson. Garrison eventually deputized Sahl,

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who moved to New Orleans to work full-time as an investigator. Sahl had famously said in the years after Kennedy’s death, "I wish I had a cause, because I have a lot of enthusiasm," according to journalist, James Wolcott, he had found a cause, “only to mislay his compass.”188 In subsequent performances, Sahl quoted from the Warren Report, which he carried onstage. Sahl transferred a passion for aggressive satiric attacks on the president into an aggressive search to uncover a conspiracy against the president. This quest radicalized Sahl beyond a point that an overwrought public was willing to go.

Assistant District Attorney Andrew Schwamba stated, “In a real sense, Mort’s probably paid a higher price than any of us involved with the investigation, he’s lost jobs, money, they attacked his reputation. He had to fight back to regain his reputation.” Sahl never fully won this battle. According to Nachman, after Sahl became involved with the Kennedy investigation, he began losing his “comic distance.”189 The comic who revolutionized modern stand-up never fully recovered after this fall from grace. “Once at the red-hot center, he found himself in the floating leper colony for lost entertainers.”190 Mort Sahl has remained on the fringes of mainstream comedy and satire ever since.

Bias exists in political comedy with differences in political parties and social movements being prevalent; however, the biggest “biases are focused on the need to entertain versus the need to preach. Ratings win every time.”191 The general public wants and needs a voice to express their concerns, but comics must recognize that the first credo

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188 James Wolcott, “Mort the Knife”, 2.
189 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 29.
190 James Wolcott, “Mort the Knife”, 2.
191 Dagnes, A Conservative Walks Into a Bar, 7.
of political comedy is, be funny, the democratization and radicalization of audiences is secondary. Political comedy was and continues to be the “equalizing force between the people and the presidency,” however, comedians are wise to ‘play to the room’, and recognize the value and the need for light-hearted parody as much as a harsh satiric invective.

The rebellion moved on. Political humor of the 1960s mirrored the atmosphere of society. The wave of counterculture in comedy passed into the ultra-aware 1970s and the greed filled 1980s. Whether it was the hopefulness over electing a sympathetic, young liberal, the devastation of his subsequent assassination, exhaustion over the tumultuous 1960s, or simple apathy - appetites for political satire changed, but the appreciation for political comedy continued.

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Chapter Four  
The Equalization—The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and Laugh-In

Prior to the widespread introduction of television in American homes, people ventured out into the world to enjoy entertainment. In doing so, they made choices. There was nothing idle or happenstance about seeing a performance of Mort Sahl. One knew what to expect. For the most part, audiences were seeking out entertainment that reinforced their own ideals. By 1960, however, ninety percent of homes had a television and unsuspecting audiences were introduced to unexpected new points of view.

Kennedy, with his youth and good looks, completely fit the bill for this new medium. Johnson and Nixon did not fare so well. Not only did they struggle with a turbulent society, but they did so in America’s living room, often as the butt of a comedians joke. Thanks to the ground work established and solidified by Dunne, Rogers, and Sahl, presidents had no choice but to address the potential impact of jabs both dull and pointed.

Two comedy shows, Laugh-In and The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, stood out as examples of a new and changing culture. Each became a voice of and to their audience, but they each had very different messages. Doyle Greene asserts, “Whereas Laugh-In became famous for how it said things, The Smothers Brothers became famous for what they said.”193 The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour ran from 1967 to 1969. The latter started benignly enough, but with elder brother, Tommy, leading the charge, the show quickly became a satiric touchstone for the time. A friend agreed “[Tommy] considered himself a spokesman for a generation. He felt it was his destiny to challenge

Meanwhile, Laugh-In ran from 1968-1973 and embraced the psychedelic look of the counter-culture while mostly avoiding a true political message, instead embracing Day-Glo soaked parody.

Both of these shows provided their audience with a renewed view of their culture and their candidates; and they followed in the footsteps of predecessors Dunne, Rogers, and Sahl, in order to create styles and impart a message. In Mr. Dooley, Dunne provided a character that was familiar to his audience. The Smothers Brothers unassuming and likable duo and the Aquarius soaked cast of Laugh-In also manicured personas to relate to their viewers. Rogers provided a seal of approval and passive promotion to candidate Franklin Roosevelt through their association. Laugh-In supplied the same promotion to Richard Nixon. Sahl was willing to risk his celebrity to mercilessly skewer governmental policies he disagreed with. Tommy Smothers also put his politics before his popularity, even at the height of the brothers’ career.

The Smothers Brothers were born 22 months apart on Governors Island in the Upper New York Bay. Their Father was an Army Major, and the family was soon stationed in the Philippines. Ten hours after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, they also invaded this Southeast Asian Island. The boys and their mother, who was soon to give birth to their sister, Sherry, got out on the last American transport. Their father stayed on to defend the island and was soon captured. Major Smothers survived the Bataan Death March and life in a POW camp, until he was inadvertently killed by friendly fire in 1945 when Allied pilots bombed the Japanese POW ship he was held on.195

194 Robinson, Dance of the Comedians, 174.
The fatherless family grew up in Southern California where mother, Ruth, struggled with alcoholism and tumultuous relationships with a selection stepfathers. All three kids were at times farmed out to grandparents and other family members. Tommy, the oldest was judged by a teacher as being a “very stubborn” child; who would either “be a great man” or “maybe a criminal.” His siblings remember Tommy as, “the responsible one,” who “felt he had to take care of the whole family.” Despite the difficulties in their home life, both boys were active and popular students and participated in the Redondo Beach High School choral groups, where Dick proved to have a lovely tenor voice.

Dick’s ability to harmonize provided entrée into his older brother’s amateur singing groups. Early on, music solidified the bond between the two. These groups also provided Tommy with a way to exhibit his mastery of music, which he learned by ear. It was not until he was thirty-one, that Tommy discovered he was a “major dyslexic,” causing him to struggle with notes or letters on a page. In addition to music, Dick was head cheerleader and Tommy competed in gymnastics. After graduation, Tommy moved on to San Jose State University to study advertising and Dick followed, hoping to become a teacher.


Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 8.


Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 14.
Tommy claims his early musical influence was Burl Ives, who popularized folk music in the 40s with songs like “Jimmy Crack Corn” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain.” Comedian George Gobel, whose low-key and unpretentious parlance in the 1950s was an early model for Tommy’s on-stage demeanor, confirmed that a performer need not be slick or well-spoken to be a favorite with the audience. The Smother’s Brothers also admired the Kingston Trio, whose first record, “Tom Dooley”, helped to kick off the renewed appreciation for folk music in 1958. Their performance style of presenting each song with a brief descriptive history “provided a template Tom and Dick would use to shape and perfect their stage act.”

The Kingston Trio had started at the Purple Onion in San Francisco, and with the success of their single, went across the street to the hungryi, where Mort Sahl had started his career. The Purple Onion was seeking a similar type of group to regain their audience. The Smothers Brothers and Gawd first appeared at the Purple Onion in 1959. The name was provided by the club manager, who thought it sounded ironic. Tommy and Dick were the brothers and Gawd was an acquaintance, Bobby Blackmore, who sang lead and played guitar. In those early days, Tommy was the mouthpiece for the group entirely. Dick explained, “Tommy did all the talking, and Bobby and I sort of pretended we were tuning. There was a comfort—I’ve always had a comfort … of knowing the songs and music, and that’s all I had to do.” The group did so well that they were given two back-to-back sixteen week contracts.

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200 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 10.

201 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 16.

At the end of this run, they were offered a summer booking at the Wagon Wheel in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Blackmore was disgruntled over newspaper reviews that left out Gawd and quit the group. Dick expected that would be the end of their musical venture and planned to continue with his efforts to become a teacher. Tommy insisted they try to work as a duo. “Tom realized almost instinctively that awkwardness, long silences, even disconnected and incomplete thoughts were his friends, and became part of his arsenal.” In the same way that Rogers public image was a characterization of his own personality, the charming but bumbling character that Tommy had used in school to hide his lack of reading ability became his new stage persona.

Onstage, Dick would attempt to share the histories of various songs, while Tom “digressed, meandered, misbehaved, interrupted, and acted, basically, like an impish little brother” even though he was almost two years older and very much the leader of the team. Dick explained about one February 1960 engagement, “Once we got onstage, within the first couple lines—boom! It was just there. There was just something about the naturalness of being two.” The successful performances led to an extended run at the Limelight in Aspen, where they doubled as busboys. Both brothers credit this time in their career as the laboratory where they worked out their sound, style, and act. Their ability as musicians and comics grew, their strength as satirists did not appear until The Smother Brothers Comedy Hour began.

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203 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 12.
204 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 1.
205 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 26.
Will Rogers could credit much of his success to skill, charm, and likability. Audiences want to share a political opinion with someone that they perceived to be not unlike themselves. The Smothers brothers also capitalized on their congeniality. Not long after the release of their first album, New York Times, critic Robert Shelton expounded:

The appeal of the Smothers Brothers totals more than one Tom Smothers plus one Dick Smothers. It is a result of a good deal of musical acumen and a fresh type of stinging satire, directed at a field wide open for it—folk music. Tom’s foolery, reflects the speech pattern of a frightened tenth-grader giving a memorized talk at a Kiwanis meeting, whereas brother Dick’s cherubic look suggests that he may have just won a Boy Scout merit badge for bass-playing. Together, the Smothers Brothers use a merciless variety of musical and comedy devices to smother the folk-song craze in wit.\(^\text{206}\)

The beloved pair mixed beautiful folk melodies, good-humored banter, and just enough sibling rivalry to create a bit of tension, all packaged in clean-cut charm and matching red blazers. They were primed to reach the pinnacle of success, with networks vying for the opportunity to present the Brothers to America each week. It was not until this enviable opportunity came to fruition, that Tommy Smothers discovered his revolutionary spirit and put both their futures at risk.

While the Smothers Brothers were enjoying almost overnight success, two other performers were taking a longer route to arrive at fame. Dan Rowan and Dick Martin were throwbacks to an earlier style of comedy, replete with bow-tied tuxedos and obvious set-ups for even more obvious jokes. Rowan and Martin were two unlikely characters to act as grand marshals, for the eventual counter-culture parade. They were two workaday writers selling what the audiences would buy and when the audiences changed, they were

\(^{206}\) Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 37.
willing to change with them, at least outwardly. The two men followed very similar timelines in order to reach that point of change.

Dan Rowan was born July 2, 1922, on a carnival train. The son of performers, he was orphaned at age eleven, and spent four traumatic years at the McClelland Home for Orphans in Pueblo, Colorado. Rowen recalls lining up for inspection when potential adoptive parents would come to visit. He knew that the chances of a tall, older boy getting adopted were not likely. However, at the age of sixteen he was taken in by foster parents and completed his high school career as an active student and football player. In 1940, he took a bus to Hollywood in hopes of getting work and landed in the mailroom of Paramount Pictures. While there, he made a good impression on studio head, Buddy DeSylva, and eventually became Paramount’s youngest staff writer\(^\text{207}\)

When the World War II began, Rowan joined and flew P-40s in New Guinea until he was shot down in 1943. After his recovery, Rowan took acting classes in his free time. In 1945, he married Phyllis Mathis, a runner-up to Miss America. He gave up his entertainment interest and took over a foreign car dealership. “I had a sizable bank account, a nice four-bedroom-and-den in Van Nuys … but I was restless.”\(^\text{208}\) In 1952, Rowan sold his interest in the dealership, and gave comedy another try. Friend and comic Tommy Noonan asked Rowan to do some writing for him. Noonan suggested he team up with another writer Noonan knew, Dick Martin.


\(^{208}\) Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 787-788.
Dick Martin was a comic writer who filled the gaps in his writing career as a bartender. Also born in 1922, in Detroit, Michigan. Martin enjoyed a much more stable upbringing than Rowan, but nevertheless, was anxious to get out of Detroit. He graduated from Michigan State University and worked in the Ford Motor Plant in Battle Creek, Michigan until he bolted to California in 1944. Martin was a gifted comic writer, with an easy and open personality. He was soon a writer on CBS radio shows, *Duffy’s Tavern* and *The Bing Crosby Show.*

During their first writing session together Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, developed a bit where a drunken salesman in the audience heckles a Shakespearean actor. The two writers offered the bit to Noonan who passed on it. In January of 1953, nine days after their first meeting, the two writers became the two performers as they presented their drunken heckler/Shakespearean actor routine to a receptive crowd at Charley Foy’s Supper Club in Los Angeles. Dan Rowan and Dick Martin became a team on the spot, and the bit became a mainstay of their act.

The two worked their way up the entertainment ladder very slowly, playing dives all across the country. As Rowan commented, “Small towns, medium-sized towns, one-nighters— we’ve worked every toilet in the country, but it was a great proving grounds: it gave us confidence.” Not unlike the Smothers Brothers time in Colorado, this dues paid off, helping the two to develop a solid, cohesive act, before they got in front of the kinds of audiences that contain career decision makers. Dick explained:

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209 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 800.

210 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 820.

211 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 885.
When we discovered it was not what we said but the way we said it, it opened up a whole new range. [Dick believed there was] a lot of Burns and Allen in us. We didn’t sing, didn’t dance, didn’t do impressions. We just developed this wonderful ability to read each other’s minds.\textsuperscript{212}

The team did not initially play to the most sophisticated crowds; therefore they chose “universally recognizable targets for their lampoonery.”\textsuperscript{213} This soft-soap style of parody would continue when they added political humor in future performances. Rowan and Martin never took on the aggressive satiric approach led by Tommy Smothers. They spoofed television westerns, the birds and the bees, a nudist colony, and a newscaster interviewing a dense surgeon, with Rowan asking “Well, doctor, in what field do you operate?” and Martin answering: “Oh, we don’t operate in the field, we have a new building.”\textsuperscript{214}

By 1956, the team of Rowan and Martin had worked their way up to appearances at the larger and more renowned venue of the Golden Nugget in Miami Beach, Florida. One evening, a mutual friend brought Walter Winchell, the famous gossip columnist, to a performance. Although Winchell was somewhat past his prime, he still had enough influence to be helpful to a comedy duo looking for their big break. Winchell’s patronage resulted in performances at the Latin Quarter in New York and the Cocoanut Grove in Los Angeles, also the notice of such luminaries as Jerry Lewis and Milton Berle.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{212} Erickson, \textit{From Beautiful Downtown Burbank}, 830-835.
\textsuperscript{213} Erickson, \textit{From Beautiful Downtown Burbank}, 844.
\textsuperscript{214} Erickson, \textit{From Beautiful Downtown Burbank}, 844.
\textsuperscript{215} Erickson, \textit{From Beautiful Downtown Burbank}, 896.
The most coveted prize from the interaction with Winchell was a seven-year contract with NBC that began with a November 23, 1956 appearance on Winchell’s new variety show, *The Walter Winchell Show*. Appearances on *The Bob Hope Chevy Show*, *The Perry Como Show*, and *The Dinah Shore Show*, and at the London Palladium followed. In 1957, the two starred in a western comic send-up, *Hot Horse*, “cast as two dimwitted outlaws who end up broke because they can’t afford to feed the cattle they’ve stolen.”216 The movie was not well received, and by 1960, the contract was cancelled.

Despite this disappointment, the team of Rowan and Martin had already made their mark. Martin explained their style of comedy:

> There are about 180,000,000 people in this country and about 1 percent like Mort Sahl, but 20 percent like broad comedy. We try to reach the 20 percent. We’re not evangelists or educators…. If people want to laugh …we try and make them laugh.217

The turbulence in American society was not only represented by satiric commentary. As Martin points out, many viewers saw the atmosphere around them, and simply wanted to see these changes reflected in a humorous, upbeat way, without the inherent social judgment attached. The next step was to find the right vehicle. On September 13, 1964, ABC bet on a trial variety special, *The Rowan and Martin Show*. Billed as “something new and different,” critics disagreed with this description, labeling the show as yet another, typical variety show. Despite these critiques, with this show, *Laugh-In* had its embryonic start.218

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216 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 948.

217 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 993-997.

218 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 1038.
Like Rowan and Martin, so too did the Smothers Brothers fail in their first attempt at network television. The 1965 *Smothers Brothers Show*, cast Tom as “an apprentice angel, returning after being lost at sea to live with, and complicate the life of, his brother Dick.”\(^\text{219}\) This escapist fare was a bad fit for the comic brothers. NBC’s *Bonanza* held first place on Sunday evening television since 1964. CBS was anxious to unseat them and also divest its self of its “image as the network of the geriatric set.”\(^\text{220}\) CBS had placed many shows in the target spot to no avail. The clean-cut and likeable Smothers Brothers seemed like a strong choice. At first hesitant, Tommy realized that since CBS was asking them to take on a Goliath in *Bonanza*, he could ask for things in return. Hoping to avoid the disaster of his last show, Tommy wanted control. He explained. “I was not thinking politics, I was not thinking social commentary. I was thinking creative control in the most classic sense of the word. [This was] one of the greatest joys of the show.”\(^\text{221}\)

Tommy Smothers shared his point of view with future head writer and roommate, Mason Williams, a comedian, folksinger, and composer of the famous instrumental guitar-led anthem “Classical Gas”. Williams stated, “There was nothing on TV for us or our friends. So we said, let’s put on a show for us, rather than the sanitized and homogenized stuff on TV at the time.”\(^\text{222}\) The writing staff covered three generations of

\(^{219}\) Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 48.


\(^{221}\) Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 58, MPT-I Remember – Tommy Smothers.

writers, including up-and-coming funnymen, Rob Reiner, Steve Martin and, Bob Einstein, causing the show to “seem reassuringly old-fashioned and playfully fresh at the same time.” An endorsement on their premiere from Ed Sullivan did not hurt either, giving the impression that the boys would deliver on their clean cut image. 

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour balanced appearances from classic Hollywood stars like Greer Garson, Betty Davis, and Lana Turner with performances from the latest musicians, including Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, and Buffalo Springfield. The brother’s squeaky clean image and beautiful singing, along with the shows diverse approach to talent appealed to a broad audience. Tommy’s drive to bring a fresh attitude to a classic variety show format was just what CBS needed to capture the attention of 13.5 million households, when The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour premiered on January 22, 1967. After two shows, the brothers’ received “a 36 share of the available audience to Bonanza’s 26.”

An episode in the first season opened with announcer Roger Carroll’s booming welcome: “And now, two of the brightest, freshest faces in show business today.” Guests George Burns and Jack Benny entered, dressed in Dick and Tom’s iconic red blazers, carrying the brothers’ instruments, and adopting their respective personalities. Audiences of all ages embraced the playful humor. A later episode featured Betty Davis,

223 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 66.
224 Smothers, “I Remember”.
225 Dagness, A Conservative Walks Into a Bar, 110.
226 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 81.
227 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 80.
Mickey Rooney, and The Who, the band known for ending their rock performances by destroying their instruments. After performing their hit *My Generation*, an overloaded air cannon, that drummer Keith Moon typically packed with explosives for performance impact, detonated, filling the stage with smoke. Singer Roger Daltry recalls, “Bette Davis was on the floor, She passed out … She fainted! And Mickey Rooney was jumping up and down shouting for more!”228 The exuberant coupling of old and new talent made *The Comedy Hour* the first “must-see TV”, soon defeating Bonanza as the Sunday night favorite.229

As the show continued, the brother’s became, according to critics, “increasingly mischievous and socially provocative.”230 Tommy insists, “I didn’t know what a liberal was until we were defined as such.”231 For Tommy, his introduction into political protest came through personal experience. In 1964, after a road show in Indiana, a disagreement between road manager Ken Fritz and a promoter led to an appearance by the Highway Patrol. The exchange became heated and the brothers and their manager were hauled to jail but not before Tommy was knocked unconscious by the officer. “Tom calls that his “first personal experience of social injustice” and the thing that opened his eyes to the idea that when protesters and demonstrators complained about police brutality, perhaps they weren’t exaggerating.”232 Although this experience did not created an immediate response, it did make Tommy more aware of social injustice and as the Smothers

228 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 145.
231 Tommy Smothers, “I Remember”.
232 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 47.
Brothers Comedy Hour continued, during years of incredible political and social upheaval, Tommy made use of his very public platform.

A mock public service announcement reminded the public that LBJ had requested Americans not to travel abroad. Tommy grinned, “Okay all you boys in Vietnam, come on home.”233 Another exchange further alienated then President Johnson:

Tom: Even right here in this country. If there’s something we don’t like, we have the right as members of this country to stand right up and throw the government right out!
Dick: Wait a minute, Tommy, You love this country.
Tom: I know I love the country. I’m just not too sure about the government.234

The war in Vietnam was escalating with record numbers of US soldier deaths by March of 1968. Robinson describes Johnson as, “haunted by the war, acutely aware of criticism, and un-like Kennedy, ill-equipped personally to control the performance of humor in any constructive way.”235 One recourse was to complain to his friend and CBS President, Edward Stanton.

In order to assure the increasingly radicalized Smothers Brothers would back-off of the president, CBS management acquiesced to Tommy on his request to have long blacklisted folk singer, Pete Seeger on as a guest. The resulting appearance of Seeger and his performance of “Waste Deep in the Big Muddy” infuriated the censors. The song tells of a WWII captain who forces his men to cross a river only to have them stuck in a quagmire. The final line, “We’re waist deep in the Big Muddy, and the big fool says to

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233 The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, “Young and hot Patty Duke on the Smothers Bros. Comedy Hour part 1 (March 20, 2014) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRT-ImWGLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRT-ImWGLI) (accessed Jan 20, 2015).

234 Tommy Smothers, “I Remember”.

235 Robinson, Dance of the Comedians, 174.
"push on," was a clear allusion to LBJ’s approach in Vietnam. The song was originally edited by the censors, but Tommy’s public outcries led to Seeger’s return performance the following season. A later episode had the appealing young brothers who previously sang “Jimmy Crack Corn” and “Tom Dooley” crooning the lines, “The war in Vietnam keeps on a’ragin’/ blacks and whites still haven’t worked it out/ Pollution, guns and poverty surround us/ No wonder everybody’s droppin’ out.” The Smothers Brothers political philosophy was now fully manifest. Tommy explains that he did not set out to be a political satirist, but simply grew up in an era when it was “okay to say what was right.” Being told by CBS sensors that he could not speak up, radicalized the righteous young man.

Perhaps the boldest political statement made by The Smother’s Brothers Comedy Hour was made not by the brothers at all, but through the presidential campaign of regular cast member Pat Paulsen. Paulsen was a deadpan comic known for the flat affect of his delivery. Tommy said of Paulsen, “He was as close to Buster Keaton as you can get.” From the earliest planning stages of the show, Tommy thought it would be a great running bit to create editorials, a satiric take on standard network editorials that were common on all networks at the time. Tommy’s struggles with the teleprompter cast the job to Paulsen. The running bit with comic observations on topics such as gun control,

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236 Aniko Bodroghkozy, Groove Tube, 131.
237 Tommy Smothers, “I Remember”.
238 Tommy Smothers, “I Remember”.
239 Tommy Smothers, “I Remember”.
the pill, and the draft, quickly became an audience favorite. When the brothers approached Paulsen about running for president in early 1968, he replied, “Why not, I can’t Dance.”

A mock candidacy is a well-worn comic vehicle that had already been used by Will Rogers, Gracie Allen, and even Alvin from Alvin and the Chipmunks in 1960, the latter prompting Jack Kennedy to joke, “I’m glad to know I have at least one worthy opponent.” Paulsen’s running gag started, not unlike many candidacies, with his insistence that he would not run. At that point, Nixon and Wallace had just declared themselves, but Ronald Reagan and Bobby Kennedy had not. On the show, Paulsen complained to Dick, “There are so many other candidates denying their candidacy, that it’s hard for me to find equal time to deny mine.” Paulsen could soon be seen crisscrossing the nation to raise funds at, “lemonade stands, kiss-for-a-quarter offers, and a celeb-studded dinner” where Paulsen said of the attendees, "I expect a lot of them won’t even vote for me, The important thing is, I got their money.”

Don Bradley, an influential campaign advisor to John F. Kennedy in 1960, and California Governor Pat Brown in 1962 was enlisted to guide the ersatz presidential bid. Bianculli asserts, “What had begun as a simple piece of abstract conceptual art wound up

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241 Robinson, Dance of the Comedians, 175.


243 Bianculli, Dangerously Funny, 218.

244 David Browne, “Mock the Vote”. 
as an astoundingly well-informed, pitch-perfect attack on the process of running for office.”

“Proto-Colbert” Paulsen used the same inane slogans and empty promises as other candidates, telling voters from “New York City to Jacksonville”, that theirs “was the greatest city in the country and he wanted to move there.”

His campaign culminated with a mockumentary “Pat Paulsen: The Making of a President” that included narration from Henry Fonda and interviews with Woody Allen, Andy Williams, and Robert F. Kennedy, who said the “candidate” had “peaked a little early.” The scene was deleted when the senator was assassinated days later.

As censors and critics alike were reevaluating the number one show on Sunday nights, NBC was seeking out its own fresh, modern spectacle to garner their cut of the youth audience. *Laugh-in* premiered in January of 1968, after the Summer of Love and the hippie onslaught. As a result, the show did not have to endure much of the scrutiny felt by the Smothers Brothers when they relaxed their personal style and grew out their side-burns. Although neither the hosts nor the creators of *Laugh-in* personally embraced the flower child aura, they each brought a unique vision that contributed to the ultimate product.

Producer George Schlatter envisioned a show that could be done only on television. He believed most television was simply “radio with pictures” and he was...

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245 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 213.


anxious to take advantage of the medium. Rowan and Martin were great fans of the avant-garde comedy of Ernie Kovacs, the comedian whose experimental variety show ended in 1962, with Kovacs’ untimely death. However, the largest single influence on *Laugh-In*’s style was the 1938 musical revue, ‘*Hellzapoppin*’, which featured the comedy team of Olson and Johnson and an ever changing cast of wild characters, outrageous running gags, and unexpected segues.

Robinson describes *Laugh-In* as the “ageless attractions of vaudeville and burlesque with broad-based satire, all infused with a disarming zaniness that simultaneously ridiculed and reveled in the allure of the pop counterculture.” The most novel element of *Laugh-In* was its look. Bright colors and groovy design were framed with bold cinematic experimentation. Montages, jump-cuts, and zoom-ins led viewers on a dizzying race to catch the punch line in running jokes and sight gags. Although occasional political jokes or social commentary were sprinkled in, it was easy to miss, and nonsensical yet familiar catchphrases provided viewers with familiar assurance that they actually got the joke. Aniko Bodroghkozy contends that “The black-out, rapid-fire manner of delivery tended to blunt the political implications of much of the humor. By the time the viewer got the message behind the joke, two or three other non-political jokes or black-outs had already whizzed by.” This format provided a kinship with

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248 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 1267-68.
249 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 1051-52.
250 Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians*, 182.
younger viewers while allowing establishment types to believe they were not “so square after-all.”

*Laugh-In* became a proving ground for characters and running gags created by young comics like Arte Johnson, Ruth Buzzy, Flip Wilson, Judy Carne, Henry Gibson, Alan Sues, Richard Dawson, Lily Tomlin, and Goldie Hawn, who danced in the club scenes in a bikini with Day-Glo messages such as, “The Pill Stops Inflation” and “Tinker Bell Is a Fairy” painted on her body. The Hollywood Reporter, proclaimed, “Not since Ernie Kovacs had there been such electronic insanity … a lightning paced marathon of running gags, blackouts, and colliding non-sequiturs on film, on tape, and painted across the female anatomy.” Doyle Greene asserts that regular cast member, Arte Johnson’s catch phrase “Very interesting…but shtupid!” epitomizes “*Laugh-in’s* approach to “style over substance.” Where the Smothers Brothers followed in the footsteps of firebrand Sahl, *Laugh-In* harkened back to Dunne’s creation of a caricature based upon the characters of the era.

Television historian Donna McCrohan wrote that *Laugh-In* “was not turbulent, did not advocate turbulence, and had less in common with Abbie Hoffman than with Milton Berle. But because it knocked the establishment, it held tremendous appeal for viewers who wanted to see the establishment knocked.”

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253 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 1776-77.
254 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 1841-43.
256 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 314-16.
were far more with feathers than stones. Schlatter made his lack of political philosophy very clear: “The Smothers Brothers had an agenda. I frankly didn’t give a fuck.”

*Laugh-In* agreed to steer clear of any reference to the chaos at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Erickson describes the *Laugh-In* appeal:

*Laugh-In* depicted the decade in the way that many people wanted to see it—and, today, would like to remember it. The series represented the lighter, happier aspects of the Revolution: Colorful psychedelic highs instead of sinister, acid-flashback downers; soft, cuddly bikini babes instead of stony-faced feminists; custom-tailored Nehru jackets instead of smelly, grungy tie-dyes; immaculately groomed sideburns and afros instead of unkempt, knee-length hair; jokes for jokes’ sake on a wide range of topics instead of fluent Tract.

Perhaps Dan Rowan explained it best in a 1969 interview:

One of the reasons [we are] succeeding is because today’s audience is aware that life around them is not the way they were told it was when they were in school … The very use of the satiric form supposes respect for audience awareness. That’s the base from which *Laugh-In* starts.

Perhaps humor was where *Laugh-In* started, but a political agenda definitely crept in, it was just not the philosophy one might expect from the hippie-child, Day-Glo world that the show seemed to represent.

*Laugh-In* masqueraded as a politically liberal, counter-culture celebration, all the while being a tool in Nixon’s campaign. Head writer Paul Keyes was a friend and eventual speech writer for Richard Nixon. In 1969 Dan Rowan said of *Laugh-In*’s chief scribe, “President Nixon calls him four or five times a week and when he's in San Clemente, Paul's always there. He is very close to the administration on a personal and on

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257 Christopher Arnott, “Turn-in, Turn-on, Laugh-in”, *New Haven Advocate* (October 16, 2006).

258 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 317-21.

259 Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 284-86.
a political basis.” 260 Producer George Schlatter felt that Keyes' position as head writer at times contributed to *Laugh-In*’s political self-censoring. “Paul was … being very careful we didn't go too far [to the left]. He wrote pretty good jokes, [but] they were all pretty much right-wing jokes.”261 It was Keyes who persuaded Nixon to appear on the show. Beyond the overt support Nixon was given during the campaign by appearing on the show, what political content that did appear in the show during the election season of 1968 was critical of Democrats RFK, LBJ, Hubert H. Humphry, Eugene McCarthy, and George Wallace. “Criticism of Nixon on Laugh-In was virtually non-existent prior to the 1968 election.”262 While *Laugh-In* filled the void for conservatives who wanted to see themselves as free-wheeling and liberal, it mislead the American people by presenting one reality and fostering another.

Roger Stone asserts that, “No American President had a more tortured relationship with television than Richard Nixon.”263 On Sept 16, 1968, Nixon’s brief cameo appearance on *Laugh-In* was a preemptive attempt to counter this agony. It only took six tries in order for the candidate to appear remotely human as he awkwardly posited the established catchphrase, “Sock it to me?” 264 There is no way to accurately measure the impact of Nixon’s appearance on *Laugh-In*. Kliph Nesteroff insists that the


261 Nesteroff, “The Comedy Writer…”.

262 Greene, Politics and the American Television Comedy, 128.


five-second appearance did more to convey “a good-sport persona, and a sense of humor” than anything in the rest of Nixon’s campaign.\(^{265}\) Regardless of the number of voters swayed to Nixon’s side, this incident shows the blurring of comedy and politics to a dangerous extreme. Comedy can provide insight into political candidates; however, in this case comedy was used not only to endorse a candidate, but to create a masquerade that Nixon could use to appear more open and liberal.

From Dunne at the earliest days of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, up until Nixon took office, comedians and politicians had maintained a sometimes close, sometimes uneasy balance. The two roles had found ways to aid each other and at times put each other on notice in efforts to educate, speak for, or curry favor with the American people. Looking back on the reputation of the 37\(^{\text{th}}\) President, it is not surprising that this symbiotic relationship would break down during his tenure. In what is possibly the most direct incident of a politician working in a calculated effort to destroy the livelihood of a comedian, Nixon actively pursued the cancellation of *The Smother’s Brothers Comedy Hour*.

Despite ongoing censorship battles with CBS, the popular show was renewed for the 1969 –70 TV season.\(^{266}\) However, once Nixon ascended to the presidency, Tom Smothers insisted he was a target. This may at first seem paranoid and narcissistic, but consider the following bit of old world espionage. *TV Guide* had previously given glowing support in regard to the show’s censorship battles, which the magazine said: “smacks too much of the atmosphere of the tyrannies” proclaiming, “We cannot agree that ‘entertainment’ or ‘comedy’ is some innocuous thing that produces laughter but must

\(^{265}\) Nesteroff, “The Comedy Writer…”.

\(^{266}\) Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 283.
have nothing to do with the real issues of living.” 267 After Nixon’s election, however, publisher Walter Annenberg, suddenly adopted a hardline stance against the content of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, calling for the shows cancellation. 268 Soon after, Nixon appointed Annenberg ambassador to the Court of St. James.

Though this could be coincidental, it is no coincidence that just a few weeks prior to *TV Guide* scathing attack on the Smothers Brothers, correspondence from Richard Nixon to John Ehrlichman expressed Nixon’s desire to take action against the “television programs” that were “deliberately negative.” 269 Nixon wrote: “You will recall that on several occasions I have suggested the 5 O’clock group [Nixon’s special team to handle public relations] might direct some of its activities toward the letter to the editor and call to television commentators and programs…” 270 Perhaps the most surprising factor in this letter is just who is encouraging Nixon’s focus on Tommy and Dick. Nixon writes on that, “Paul [Keyes] suggested… the Smothers Brothers.” 271 Paul Keyes, head writer for competing show *Laugh-In* was advising Nixon on ways to undermine the success of rival Smother’s Brothers. This correspondence was dated March 11, 1969. *The Smother’s Brothers Comedy Hour* was cancelled April 9, 1969.

Bianculli laments that, “by becoming unexpected martyrs to the cause of free speech, the Smothers Brothers lost their most influential national TV platform just when

267 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 272.

268 Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 117.


that freedom mattered the most.\footnote{Bianculli, \textit{Dangerously Funny}, 84.} The Smothers Brothers originally appeared as a folksy, All-American comic interlude presided over by an endearing man-child and his long-suffering straight-man brother. The show evolved into an earnest and direct satiric attack on war, inequality, and the government, providing viewers with a template for the average American’s reaction to the absurdities and disappointments in American society and government. On the other hand, \textit{Laugh-In} presented the fantasy of counter-culture freedom in the same paradoxical and escapist tone of \textit{I Dream of Jeanie} or \textit{Bewitched}. When viewing \textit{Laugh-In}, viewers could observe and, in theory, “try-on” the idealized changes in the culture. Both earnest evaluation and escapism are still vitally important responsibilities of comedy and comedians in the ongoing venture of demystifying and understanding the political process and players in America today.
Chapter Five
The Balance - Saturday Night Live

The joint responsibilities undertaken by political comedy to entertain and inform have coalesced most effectively, in the post-Vietnam, post-Nixon era of American television, through the auspices of Saturday Night Live. The oddly comfortable, counterculture comedy-variety show sprang onto the airwaves on October 11, 1975. Producer Lorne Michael’s, his team of irreverent writers, and the featured “Not Ready for Primetime Players” brought a new live format into the late night arena; however, as fresh and new as SNL appeared, it was based on longtime comic traditions congealing parody and satire into a delectable comedy confection. Echoes of Mr. Dooley, early Smothers Brothers’ skits, and Laugh-In could be heard in the humorous mimicry of SNL performers, Chevy Chase, Dana Carvey, and Phil Hartman. Mockery both gently reproaching, like Will Rogers, and aggressively goading, like Mort Sahl and the later commentary of Tommy Smothers, was also present in the groundbreaking program. Both of these styles of political comedy were fundamentally needed to address the concerns of American society and politics in the mid1970s.

The political atmosphere as America approached its bicentennial year was conflicted. Marginalized groups of Americans were now actively seeking the opportunities that had been denied them at the beginning of the century; but, despite progressive changes in society, a “New Right” was mobilizing in defense of traditional values and embracing a conservative populism. President Nixon’s resignation in 1974 and the fall of Saigon in 1975 effectively “shattered the remains of national purpose.”

Political theorist, Michael Harrington borrowed from Emile Durkheim in describing the general attitude in these days of economic recession and conservative backlash as a state of “collective sadness.”\(^{274}\) Individual Americans more often turned away from collective protest and instead turned to individual gratification through new age actualization, and increasing drug use. Peter Marin insists the 1970s demonstrated “a new world view emerging” based on “individual survival as its sole good.”\(^{275}\)

Television audiences no longer needed to be tricked into experiencing satire, with the clean cut All-American trappings of the Smothers brothers; or lulled into the false sense of flower-power revolution of *Laugh-In*. Audiences from all walks of life now recognized political satire as a welcome form of entertainment, expression, and communication. Peterson asserts that “Watergate democratized political comedy. It turned satire… from a dish enjoyed only by the cognoscenti into a buffet open to all.”\(^{276}\) *SNL* appealed to college age viewers that were “no longer threatened by the prospect of being drafted to fight a lost war” and “discovered a more comfortable means of rebellion couched in the satire” of the show.\(^{277}\) *SNL* was perfectly poised to provide this modern expression of political humor to American audiences; ironically, the primary motivating force behind *SNL* turned out be a Canadian import named Lorne Michaels.

Lorne Michael Lipowitz was born in 1944, in a kibbutz in Israel. Not long after his birth, Michaels immigrated with his family to Toronto, Canada, where his father


\(^{276}\) Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows*, 34.

worked as a furrier. His mother worked for his grandparents in their cinema, The Playhouse Theatre. This was Michaels’ first contact with show business and due to the family livelihood, motion pictures were a huge topic of interest for Michaels’ grandparents, mother, and extended family, which in turn had an “enormous influence” on him. Michaels participated in plays in high school and at summer camps along with future SNL musical director, Howard Shore, and future SNL writer and first wife, Rosie Shuster, who were both childhood friends. Michaels also acted in college at the University of Toronto, where he teamed up with comic and writing partner, Hart Pomeranz.

After college, the two began writing for a radio show for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto. Michaels described this early experience in a radio interview with SNL alum Alec Baldwin:

> It was a show called "Five Nights a Week at This Time" and we did political satire. Every week we thought we were potentially bringing down the government, and the fact that no one was listening didn’t occur to us for at least the first year but we loved doing it.  

Political commentary was an early focus for Michaels, who explains that his interest was based upon the general atmosphere as he was coming of age:

> Yeah, I think it was what was in the air at the time. It was just the beginning of the questioning of authority which was – the year I did it was 1964. We were no longer talking about World War II, and the first part of my childhood that’s all

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anyone talked about. Every teacher I had at school had been in the war. It was pretty much the gloom of that hung over most of the ‘50s.\footnote{Michaels, Here’s The Thing.}

This questioning of government purpose was a reality for many of Michaels’ generation, providing Michaels with a receptive future audience.

Michaels and Pomeranz parlayed a growing reputation as reliable and capable comedy writers into opportunities to write for American comedy shows, including\textit{ The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Show}, \textit{Lily}, a Lily Tomlin Special, and as a primary writing team on \textit{Laugh-In}. The impact of \textit{Laugh-In}’s catch phrases and political parody on Michaels’ later format choices, for \textit{SNL} are explained by \textit{National Lampoon} satirist Tony Hendra: “the TV comedy lessons learned from \textit{Laugh-In} were as essential in shaping \textit{SNL} as any counterculture or early TV lineage.”\footnote{Greene, Politics and the American Television Comedy, 196.} What had been Michaels’ desire to impact national politics became balanced against entrenched and effective comic formulas.

The team were growing ever more successful as writers, but as a comic actor, Pomeranz was unfulfilled. The team returned to Canada with the offer of their own variety show. \textit{The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour} ran from 1970 to 1971 and embraced the two-man comedy team, skit show format that the two had so successfully written for with \textit{Laugh-In}. According to Michaels, as a comic actor, Pomeranz was the more creative and talented of the two.\footnote{The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour, YouTube.com, \url{www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gXQAt8VBbs} (accessed March 17, 2015).} He also had a drive for being on stage that Michaels did not share; however, the experience on the \textit{Terrific Hour} did help Michaels find his true purpose. In the editing bay, an experienced editor taught him how to create the show from the
numerous recorded clips. Of this experience, Michaels said: “What I realize then about myself is that I’m much more interested in the production than I am in performing.”285 After the *Terrific Hour* ended, the duo split and Michaels returned to Hollywood, where a major producing opportunity would soon present itself.

In the 1970s, before the present proliferation of late night talk shows, Johnny Carson was the undisputed king of the late night airwaves. He held an enormous amount of clout with his home network of NBC. Carson refused to continue having previously broadcast episodes of *The Tonight Show* rebroadcast on his night off, Saturday night, choosing to reserve them for vacation fillers. This change would take place after the summer of 1975, allowing president of NBC Herbert Schlosser a year to pull together a new concept for Saturday nights. Coincidentally, on the day Nixon resigned, Schlosser hired 27-year old Dick Ebersol to head the project, an action that would prove to be a boon for youth culture as Dick knew that he wanted to appeal to a young audience and speak to them in their own language. Originally, Richard Pryor was tied to the conceptless new show, but Pryor’s management warned him off from the career killer of television. Ebersol came across a like-minded young voice in comic writer and actor, Lorne Michaels and engaged him to produce the new show.286

The plans for *NBC’s Saturday Night*, as the show was originally named, evolved into a repertory company of seven unknown comic actors, a different host each week, and as Michaels’ states, a desire to be “cool...something television wasn’t, except in a retro

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285 Michaels, *Here’s The Thing*.

way.”\(^{287}\) Schlosser insisted the show be produced in New York at studio 8H, NBC’s largest studio, and that the show be live. Michaels pulled together a team of comics and writers from Second City Improv Troupe and the satiric magazine *The National Lampoon*, including Chevy Chase, who was actually brought on as head writer. In the same way that Tommy Smother’s had intended to present weekly mock editorials, but passed the torch to Pat Paulsen; Michael’s intended to anchor the Weekend Update segment of the show, but felt it would throw off the balance of power with the writers putting words in the mouth of the person who had the ultimate say over their material and their jobs.\(^{288}\)

Michaels insists that it was important to him that the show’s political commentary be taken seriously and be bipartisan, stating: “Our job is, whoever is in power, we’re opposed.”\(^{289}\) *SNL* quickly became the voice for young voters to question and critique their president. Several of Michaels’ writers were also well versed in political comedy. Writer Herb Sergeant had previously worked on the satiric comedy show *That Was the Week That Was* and as a writer for Steve Allen and Johnny Carson. Sergeant devoured newspapers and television news programs, in order to base the satirical humor on actual news, never making up stories, only making light of what he came across.\(^{290}\) Current Senator from Minnesota, Al Franken also devoted his energies to political humor. Along

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\(^{288}\) Reinchel, ““Saturday Night Live” and Weekend Update, 191.


with writing partner, Tom Davis, Franken wrote a celebrated takeoff of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's book, "The Final Days," which included Dan Ackroyd as a bitter Richard Nixon and John Belushi as a toadying Henry Kissinger.291

Of the many talented writers who worked to develop SNL’s political point of view, Jim Downey was perhaps the most impactful. Vanity Fair editor, Mike Sacks insists “If Lorne Michaels is the face of Saturday Night Live, Downey is its behind-the-scenes creative force.”292 New York Times culture reporter, David Itzkoff contends “Mr. Downey has written much of the show’s most enduring political comedy, anticipating the sentiment of the moment as often as responding to it.”293 Despite the liberal political humor ever-present on SNL, Downey is known for being personally politically conservative.294 This dichotomy represents a truism about political comedy—it is not necessary for a satirist to have a burning personal agenda in order to tap into the humor of politics. Downey explains:

My approach is to do something that’s funny and not politically idiotic, as opposed to saying something profound, something that passes muster as a common-sense understanding of the state of play.295

293 Itzkoff, “SNL Writer Narrows the Gap…”.
295 Itzkoff, “SNL Writer Narrows the Gap…”.
A certain objectivity when surveying the political landscape for material, together with a team-based writing approach, provided a longevity for SNL that was harder to come by for an individual comedian like Mort Sahl, who was at times overcome by his political passions.

SNL’s political humor thrives, as does all effective political humor, on an astute awareness of the trepidations of the audience and a willingness to voice these concerns in a humorous way. Michaels’ explains that Downey’s material “would not have worked if the audience didn’t see some element of truth in it.”

Although Chevy Chase tripping and bumbling as Gerald Ford certainly falls more into the realm of high-spirited whimsy, Downey insists that he pulled no punches with his political comedy:

We did whatever we wanted, and there was nothing there that we considered to be a form of cheating. We weren’t cuddly, we weren’t adorable, we weren’t warm. We weren’t going to do easy, political jokes that played for clapter and let the audience know we were all on the same side. We were going to be mean and, to an extent, anarchists.

Lorne Michaels agrees that SNL is unyielding in its willingness to take to task the sitting president or any other politician in power, affirming, "We don't lay down for anybody."

Despite these calls to political comic action, even Downey stated of his boss, Lorne Michaels, “His preference is for the broadest likability, not the sharpest bite.”

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296 Itzkoff, “SNL Writer Narrows the Gap…”.
297 Sacks, “SNL's James Downey…”.
298 Cho, “Chevy Chase.
Tony Hendra also refutes SNL’s hard hitting satiric self-description. Despite the fact that Lorne Michaels calls Jim Downey the “best political humorist alive,”³⁰⁰ Hendra denies that SNL is a bastion of liberal political attack, instead heralding their focus on the same gimmicks that worked for counter-culture pretender, Laugh-In:

What had “worked” best on SNL were the continuing characters, the safe situations, the material that reminded the audience of what “worked” last time…. Nowhere was this more the case- and nowhere do Michael’s Laugh-In roots show more baldly-than in the ever-proliferating number of catch phrases. As “never mind” and “But nooooo…” rang around the nation, it became clear how little had changed since a “Very interesting…” and “You bet your sweet bippy” had been all the rage, and “Sock it to me” had helped Nixon into the White House ³⁰¹

So which is it? Does SNL provide the watch-dog political satire that sets audiences and presidents alike questioning their politics and society, or a light-hearted pasquinade to lampoon and jest with American leaders and her people? The answer is – both.

Satire and parody both live happily within the production of the longest running comedy variety show on American television, proving the need for both forms of political comedy. By the time SNL premiered in 1975, political comedy was solidified as one legitimate form of political dialogue between the people and their elected leadership. With the longevity of the show, therefore, an effective means of study is revealed to determine the ways in which this communication progressed in the final quarter of the 20th century. Presidents from Ford to Clinton accepted that SNL was a force to be reckoned with and an effective tool to communicate with their constituency; however, this tool was not used effectively in all cases.

³⁰⁰ Sacks, “SNL’s James Downey…”.
During his brief thirty months in office, Gerald R. Ford projected a modest straightforwardness, highlighted by a comment he made upon his swearing in as Vice-President: “I am proud-very proud-to be one of the two hundred million Americans.”

Robinson asserts that by defining himself first and foremost as a fellow citizen, Ford began the process of:

Recalibrating the equilibrium between the people and their highest elected official…To the extent that Americans could once again imagine someone sufficiently like their best selves in the White House…they could begin to laugh not only with scorn but with a semblance of identification and appreciation.

Michaels agreed, maintaining that Ford was seen as “a benign presence…after Nixon.”

With this reasoning, it is clear that Michaels harbored no ill will or agenda in the amusing mimicry of the president. He asserts “people were open to a more playful interpretation… starved for a lighter tone” to combat what had been such an “oppressive” era with Nixon.

President Gerald R. Ford assumed the presidency on August 9, 1974, receiving an initial 71% approval rating in the Gallup poll. The country seemed instantly relieved to receive this “benign presence”. On September 8, 1974, Ford pardoned Nixon in an act...

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305 Reincheld, ““Saturday Night Live”, 192.


307 Reincheld, ““Saturday Night Live”, 192.
that angered many Americans who wanted their previous commander and chief held accountable for the lies and deceptions he had predicated on the American people.\footnote{308}{Gerald R. Ford, “Ford Pardons Nixon” (September 8, 1974) YouTube.com (posted October 23, 2008) \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eM9dGr8ArR0} (accessed March 13, 2015).}

When Ford declared: “Our long national nightmare is over,” it was only beginning for him.\footnote{309}{Gerald R. Ford, "Our long national nightmare is over" (August 9, 1974) Miller Center, YouTube.com (posted August 6, 2014) \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LySpUpI9k1s} (accessed March 13, 2015).} The subsequent Gallup poll showed a drop of 21\% and Ford spent almost all of the rest of his presidency below 50\% approval.\footnote{310}{“Gerald R. Ford and Presidential Approval”.} Michaels and the SNL cast and crew represented the young Americans who felt shortchanged by the lack of accountability regarding Watergate.

This failure to hold Richard Nixon to task and national economic woes, in combination with a lack of secure footing on the rain soaked steps of Air Force One brought Michaels and Chevy Chase the motivation that they needed to stage a series of parody soaked skits showing Chase as a bumbling, klutzy, and ineffectual President Ford. Robinson asserts this clownish characterization represented more than a humorous aside:

> Fords verbal and physical missteps became metaphors for not only what detractors considered his personal inadequacies for the job but also the low expectations for the presidency in general following Johnson and Nixon.\footnote{311}{Robinson, \textit{The Dance of the Comedians}, 195.}

The device of a young comedian, who bears no resemblance to his subject, and makes no real effort to imitate him, tripping and blundering through various scenes replicating the president can be easily classified as broad parody; however, the underlying current of
satire is revealed by portraying the president as a foolish and incompetent leader, a sentiment shared by many Americans, as the polls attest.

Chevy Chase, for one, recognized the impact of what he was doing. In an interview in 2008, he expressed his alacrity in undermining the president:

[Ford] was a sweet man, a terrific man -- [we] became good friends after, but ... I wanted [Jimmy] Carter in and I wanted [Ford] out, and I figured look, we're reaching millions of people every weekend, why not do it.\textsuperscript{312}

Russell Peterson explains that “Chase’s non-impersonation…suggests that Ford was not worth the trouble.”\textsuperscript{313} Presidents had been on the receiving end of criticism both harsh and light-hearted since Dunne reproached McKinley for his feeble attempts at negotiating with Spanish Prime Minister Sagasta in 1898, but this was the first time that such an oafish and dismissive presidential parody was flashed on screen so relentlessly, embedding the image into the American psyche.

Ford and his press secretary, Ron Nessen, recognized the impact of \textit{SNL}’s folly and wanted to bolster Ford’s reputation as a good sport in order to diffuse any ill effect. To that end, they invited Chevy Chase to appear at the Radio-Television Correspondents Association Dinner in 1976. After President Ford had entered, made his opening remarks, and taken his seat on the dais, strains of \textit{Hail to the Chief} resounded and Chase appeared as Ford. The lanky funnyman tripped up the aisle, complete with Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi running interference as secret service agents. After the mock president stumbled onto the stage and implored Ackroyd to assist him in removing the fork he had accidentally impaled into his own leg, the real president got his chance. President Ford

\textsuperscript{312} Cho, “Chevy Chase”.

\textsuperscript{313} Peterson, Strange Bedfellows, 37.
rose to speak, revealing the tablecloth was tucked into his waist band. He then dropped the pages of his speech on the floor. Ford complemented Chevy Chase as being “a very funny suburb”, referencing the neighborhood in Maryland of the same name where many Washington movers and shakers live. Ford went on to claim “I like the people in show business…I just wouldn’t want my daughter voting for one.”\textsuperscript{314} The event was a resounding success for Ford; unfortunately, no one outside of invited guests was there to witness.

In a conversation between Al Franken and Press Secretary Nessen, the potential was discussed to take the dual president routine, or some semblance of it, national on \textit{SNL}. Both Ford and Nessen recognized the risk they were taking by participating on a live television show rich in political comedy that had already painted the president as a buffoon. Nessen insisted that coopting Chase’s interpretation of the president by appearing to be in on the joke would be worth the risk. Ford and Nessen agreed that Nessen would host, with Ford recording the famous cold opening line: “Live from New York, it’s Saturday night” and “I’m Gerald Ford, and you’re not” to replace the regular “Weekend Update” intro, normally provided by Chase.\textsuperscript{315}

The success of the correspondent’s dinner did not translate for Ford and Nessen. Although Nessen was not directly humiliated, he was surrounded by material that ultimately proved embarrassing for the White House. A spoof on the Smucker’s Jam advertising slogan claimed, “With a name like Fluckers, it’s got to be good.”\textsuperscript{316} Cast

\textsuperscript{314} Robinson, \textit{The Dance of the Comedians}, 197.

\textsuperscript{315} \textit{Saturday Night Live}, Season 1 Episode 17, NBC (April, 17, 1976)

\textsuperscript{316} \textit{Saturday Night Live}, Season 1 Episode 17, NBC (April, 17, 1976)
regulars Belushi and Jane Curtain apply the slogan to jam made of dog vomit, monkey pus, and mangled baby ducks. In the inevitable presidential parody that placed Nessen as himself opposite Chase as Ford, Chase complains about the 21 gun salutes used to wake him in the morning. Nessen insists it is necessary because the alarm clock caused the president to hop out of bed and break his ankle. Just after the actual president’s recorded opening for the “Weekend Update” segment, comedienne Gilda Radner, as befuddled correspondent Emily Littella rails against “presidential erections.” Chase assures her the issue is “presidential elections”, to which she replies with her catchphrase “nevermind.”

Whether the Washington team had misjudged the moment, or Michaels intentionally set out to make sport of the White House is unclear. Either way, the episode was at worst a debacle for the president and at the least no help at all in reaching out to young voters in the upcoming election. When Chase was asked years later if he felt as though the shows efforts to undermine the president were fair, he exclaimed:

> Of course it's fair. I mean really, the whole thing about that show is get the laugh; it always has been, and it always will be. When you have that kind of a venue and power where you can reach so many millions of people and you've become a show that people watch, you know, you can affect a lot of people, and humor does it beautifully, because humor is perspective and has a way of making judgment calls.  

Chase’s reply seems contradictory, at first insisting that anything for a laugh creates an all is fair condition. He goes on to explain the power and influence of comedy. In a sense, this is no contradiction at all. Comedians must be funny to be heard and appreciated, but

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317 Saturday Night Live, Season 1 Episode 17, NBC (April, 17, 1976).
318 Cho, “Chevy Chase”. 

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what starts as entertainment can garner influence and President Ford recognized that, although he could not master this phenomenon.

What *SNL* brought to the relationship between comedy, politics, and the American people was a recognition that the presidency was no longer sacrosanct. Despite the lack of Nielsen ratings in the 1970s and 1980s for late night programming, the longevity of *SNL* over forty years of consistent viewership, demonstrates the influence of the show and its humor to generations of Americans. What the child sexual abuse scandal would do for the Catholic Church, Watergate had done for the presidency. These positions of power that had historically been honored and revered were now considered with suspicion. Not only was Nixon a crook, but so was every politician after him, the public was just trying to figure out how and to what degree. Ford appeared to be so squeaky clean that the only recourse was to show him as too inept to be crooked. The American people were working out years of angst and disappointment that, to a degree, would never fade. *SNL* provided an outlet for these frustrations.

When Jimmy Carter took office, the American people went from frustration to boredom. *SNL* denoted this attitude with relatively few skits involving Carter, who would seem like an obvious target for comedy as a peanut farmer from Georgia. A 1978 skit about Carter’s state of the union address began with a news voiceover describing:

> The President is entering the chamber. He's smiling -- obviously, very happy he's still President. Congressmen from both sides of the aisle are standing and applauding, as is traditional for even the most disrespectful and incompetent of presidents.⁴¹⁹

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As Ackroyd drones on in sing-song patter as Carter, viewers see shots of John Belushi as Tip O’Neal and Bill Murray as Walter Mondale dozing and popping open beer. The message is clear, America had wanted something different, but this was not it. From the authentic Jimmy Carter’s perspective, he saw no need to be an entertainer, stating “If the American people wanted Bob Hope for president, they should have elected him.”

It became clear that Americans do expect a certain amount of performance in their president and Ronald Reagan was well-equipped to play the role.

Biographer Lou Cannon claimed Reagan “was not really a politician at all, but simply an actor on loan from Hollywood.” If this back-handed complement were true, the American people did not seem to mind. Robinson asserts that Ronald Reagan’s presidential persona “exemplified the transformational odyssey of self-invention that had become a hallmark of the national mythology.” At the dawn of the 1980s Americans were coming out of doldrums and reinventing themselves. Reagan provided what had been lacking in the commander and chief since Kennedy, a figurehead that the American people felt comfortable representing them to the rest of the world. Despite the fact that Reagan’s highest approval rating was only one percentage above Nixon’s, and he failed to reach the approval heights of Ford or Carter, Reagan’s reputation generally surpasses all these other modern presidents.

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322 Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians*, 204.

As a seasoned performer, Reagan gave the people what they wanted, much like the comedians he would encounter. As far as any scathing effects from SNL’s satire, Reagan was able to initially avoid the problem. Michaels and Downey, along with the original “Not Ready for Primetime Players” left SNL in 1980. The interim producers were not as adept at, or interested in political comedy; and during the intervening years, the lack of sharp political comedy proved to be deleterious to the show’s success. It was not until Reagan’s second term in office that Michaels and Downey were back at the helm, and ready to play politics for laughs. This was not a problem for Reagan, who Robinson asserts had “hard-wired humor to heroism more profoundly than any other president since Franklin Roosevelt.”

He had the confidence and smoothness to get on the front end of jokes that might be made at his expense. Ronald Reagan was “intent on exalting [the office of president] with cinematic magnificence.” Reagan, the “Teflon President”, thus titled by Senator Patricia Schroder because no scandal or negativity seemed to stick to him, was a Hollywood veteran, who recognized it was only important that they spelled his name right.

For the December 6, 1986 episode, writers Downey and Franken penned one of the highest rated political sketches in SNL history, “Masterbrain”. In the midst of the Iran-Contra scandal, Reagan feigned ignorance of arms being sold to Iran, leaving the American people to debate whether their president was unaware or dishonest. Both

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324 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 207.

325 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 205.

326 Patricia Schröder, 24 Years of House Work and the Place is Still a Mess: My Life in Politics (Kansas City: Andrews Mcmeel Publisher, 1998) 75.
presidential dementia and deception were examined with Phil Hartman portraying Ronald Reagan first as an absent-minded and genial leader. Out of sight of reporters Hartman’s Reagan morphs into the razor-sharp commander of the Iran-Contra calamity, cutting deals in Arabic and barking orders at his staff.\(^3\) This depiction of Reagan provided Americans with a comic alternative to the angry realization that Reagan may not have lived up to their expectation as a leader to be proud of. This collective release was therapeutic, but true to his moniker, Reagan emerged relatively unscathed from the scandal, and the satire.

As the 1980s progressed \(SNL\)'s subtle satire blended seamlessly with unabashed parody in a mirror of Americans apprehensions concerning their highest political leader. A 1988 episode highlights the second presidential debate with Dana Carvey as George H.W. Bush and Jon Lovitz as Michael Dukakis. Carvey gives a quick yet rambling non-answer when asked about a plan to alleviate hunger for America’s children ending with, “So let's stay on course, a thousand points of light. Well, unfortunately, I guess my time is up.”\(^4\) Jan Hooks as Diane Sawyer assures him that he has time remaining and Carvey double-talks in avoidance of saying anything. Peterson insists that \(SNL\) “makes a clear, polemic point: the presumptive president-elect is a man with nothing to say.”\(^5\) Even with light-hearted mimicry, clear dialogue is being exchanged between the American people and political leaders. At times, that dialogue is not a call to action but simply a

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shared since of astonishment at how a high-ranking, elected official could show such a blatant disregard for his constituency through boorish behavior.

The 20th century came to a close under the regime of the most scandal laden president since Nixon. In his first term, Bill Clinton stared down accusations of a twelve year affair with Jennifer Flowers, was sued for sexual harassment, was tinged with guilt by association in the Whitewater scandal, and called into question about the hiring practices of the White House travel office. In Clinton’s second term the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, casting a long shadow over the American presidency and leading to the president’s impeachment, although he was subsequently acquitted. It is amazing that with all of the accusations and intrigue surrounding the president his approval rating grew throughout his presidency.  

“Slick Willy”, so named early in his political career by *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* editor, Paul Greenberg, was the first “baby Boomer” president. Voters seemed to enjoy his easy charm masking the tricky double-talk and to some degree, they also enjoyed the equally charming Clinton imitators on *SNL*. This abundance of southern presidential doppelgängers may have contributed to the public’s ease with Clinton’s scandals. It is more likely, however; that the popularity of Bill Clinton represents America’s coming to terms with the reality that had first struck them with Watergate: All presidents will lie and cheat, if they can do it with charm and a strong economy, everyone can enjoy the joke.

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SNL provided the outlet for those who felt the need to laugh with the president and those who felt the need to laugh at the president. Initially, Phil Hartman was drafted to parody the new president, taking full advantage of his love for junk food. The December 5, 1992 episode of SNL showed Hartman as Clinton stopping in to a McDonalds during a jog with secret service agents, Kevin Nealon and Tim Meadows. After pressing the flesh with customers, and appropriating bites of their meals, Hartman responds to Meadow’s question about keeping the visit a secret from Mrs. Clinton with: “Jim, let me tell you something. There’s gonna be a lot of things we don’t tell Mrs. Clinton about. Fast food is the least of our worries.” Although the skit seems to emphasize the lightest of presidential shortcomings: a love of unhealthy food, the deeper message is one of infidelity and dishonesty.

Hartman insists that he was quickly excluded from White House publicity activities where past presidential imitators had participated. He did receive a signed photo from the president saying: “To Phil Hartman—You’re not the president, but you play one on TV and you’re OK—mostly.” The word “mostly” was interpreted by Hartman to mean, “You’re all right, but I definitely have my eye on you, because you cross the line.” Bill Clinton who had used the media so shrewdly during his presidential run, playing saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show, was now avoiding efforts by SNL to actively engage him. In twenty short years, SNL had come to a place of relevance within


333 Mike Thomas, You Might Remember Me: The Life and Times of Phil Hartman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014) 177.
the discourse between government and the American people, to the point that an expectation was present; a president now had to actively make a choice on how to address *SNL*’s voice and power.

As the Lewinsky scandal heated up during Clinton’s second term, Darrell Hammond stepped up to portray the discredited president. The February 28, 1998 episode portrayed Hammond as Clinton in a three-way phone call with Will Ferrell as Saddam Hussein and Molly Shannon as Monica Lewinsky. Hammond encourages Ferrell to start a war in order to distract from his sex scandal. When Shannon beeps into the call, Hammond assures her, he was just about to call her. Shannon then coos, sounding like a lovesick teenager “it’s like we have the same brain.” 334 The President of the United States, his girlfriend, and a foreign dictator chatting on the phone about the latest episode of then popular teen drama, *Dawson’s Creek* screams of comic absurdity; however, the satire accurately touched on the president’s immaturity, lack of impulse control, and manipulation of foreign policy as a distraction from his personal difficulties.

What the *SNL* humor about Clinton provided was a more coalesced balm, voice, and perspective than what had been previously provided by Mr. Dooley, Will Rogers, Mort Sahl, the Smothers Brothers, or *Laugh-In*. Robinson asserts, “*Saturday Night Live* finally pulled together all the formative elements that had helped shape the performance of presidential comedy as it evolved in the mid-twentieth century.” 335 The subtle balance of parody and satire aligned within the halls of studio 8H to provide a humorous voice to

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the voter’s concerns and anxieties in regard to American politics. What Michaels never forgot; however, was that humor was the priority. Al Franken explains “writers did not see what they were doing as educational; they never said ‘I’m going to write a joke so people who don’t know this in America will know it.’ You didn’t do that.” Over the course of forty years, SNL learned the lessons of its predecessors in order to entertain while being an active voice for and to the American people in an ongoing conversation with politics.

336 Reinchel’d, “‘Saturday Night Live”, 193.
Conclusion

As Saturday Night Live successfully spanned into the 21st century, healthy doses of parody and satire continued to thrive for other comedians, as well. Stephen Colbert, comic pretender to the conservative news debate, followed in the satiric steps of Pat Paulsen, with deadpan dogmatism masking his true agenda to upend hypocrisy and expand a liberal and open-minded debate within the political landscape. Perhaps his greatest coup was the flaying that he administered to then president George W. Bush in 2006 at the White House Correspondents Association Dinner. With the president seated just a few chairs away, Colbert enthusiastically shared his mock support and approval:

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...The greatest thing about this man is he's steady. You know where he stands. He believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday. Events can change; this man's beliefs never will.337

Journalist Mark Karlin described Colbert’s roasting of the president as “a devastating dissection.”338 Irrespective of the divisiveness displayed, Colbert’s presence at the event and his comments highlight the ongoing connectivity of politics and comedy.

This study has revealed this interdependent relationship between politics and comedy throughout the 20th century. In doing so, it has identified the importance of both satire and parody as equal tools of political comedy in order to prompt an open exchange


between politicians, comedians, and the American people in order to influence, entertain, and communicate within the political process. The study has identified active players in the realm of political comedy and the presidents who were their fodder, their foils, and occasionally their friends. Over the course of the 20th century, political comedy has grown from a place of minor bemusement or irritation, to a level of tremendous influence. Peterson explains that “like the advertisers of soft drinks and automobiles, politicians and their operatives will look for ways to use cultural (even counter-cultural) currents in order to better reach and influence the public.”

The entertainment delivered by political comedians and comedy programs provided a ready tool for politicians hoping to build inroads with the American people.

While candidates balanced the gage “between authenticity and illusion” on their way to the presidency, comedians balanced satire and parody in order to instigate, enlighten and entertain the American people. On the extremes of this scale, satire could burn so heatedly out of control that it could cause people to question their own ideas about their government and society. Harsh satire could also cause backlash that burns out an audience and leaves smoldering the careers of comic masters like Mort Sahl and Tommy Smothers. On the other end of this scale easy parodies that provide no real challenge to power, as was often the case with Will Rogers and Laugh-In, left audiences amused, but at times unsatisfied when struggling with questions of political leadership.

Saturday Night Live has built the most effective balance of satire and parody, and established the most institutionalized impact on presidential reputation.

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339 Peterson, Strange Bedfellows, 179.

340 Robinson, The Dance of the Comedians, 204.
History is not the practice of one reality, or set of circumstances occurring and then fading away into a new reality. History builds upon itself. There are always marks of the past, infinitesimal marks left on each new future. Each comedian examined in this study was a product of their environment, but they were also a product of those comedians that went before them. Sometime these were not conscious exchanges, like the young Will Rogers being effected by the same energy and spirit of the Chicago World’s Fair that inspired Finley Peter Dunne to create his comic persona. Sometimes these were reluctant influences, like Mort Sahl struggling against the comparison to the icon Will Rogers. Other times the impact was direct, like the influence of *Laugh-In* on *Saturday Night Live*, through their shared creative relationship with Lorne Michaels. As these building blocks of political comedy continue to grow higher, they also grow more influential and more essential to the effective communication between politics and the American people.
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