The Day America (Almost) Lost its Sense of Humor: Late-Night Talks Show Hosts, George W. Bush, and September 11, 2001

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

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Abstract

This paper explores the changes in treatment of President George W. Bush by late-night talk show hosts after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2002. Twelve weeks worth of monologues from David Letterman and Jay Leno are examined using genre of political satire as the primary method of explanation. The initial sections of the paper deal with the histories of both political satire and late-night talk shows respectively. The intermediate sections of the paper discuss the events of September 11 and the comedians' monologues before and after the tragedy. Finally, the paper uses the genre of political satire to explain variations in the treatment of President Bush.

Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks are due to Dr. Beth Messner, whose time and guidance allowed this thesis to be created. She helped me focus on a subject and was patient while I worked though it. Dr. Messner's encouragement and advice were invaluable in the formation of this paper, and I am grateful.

Purpose

This paper attempts to argue that comedians' treatment of President George W. Bush changed after September 11, 2001. The humorists' approaches will be uncovered by examining the opening monologues of *The Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* The content of the monologues will be examined using the genre of satire to draw conclusions about any variations in their treatment of the President. This paper will attempt to show that the comedians' attitudes toward Bush were influenced by the September 11 terrorist attacks. This paper first will discuss the respective histories of satire and late-night talk shows. Next, it will focus on the events and emotions surrounding September 11. Then, after discussing the method by which the material was examined, the paper will discuss jokes made about George W. Bush before and after September 11. Finally, this work will draw on the genre of satire to explain variations in the treatment of the President by these humorists.

The Disillusioned Voice of Many Eras: A Brief History of Satire

The genre of satire is nearly 2200 years old. It has changed greatly over the years, from its origins in plays and verse poetry to more contemporary forms. Because of the many forms satire has taken over the years, identifying a single definition of the genre remains difficult. The word "satire" comes from the Latin *satura,* which means either "full," as it does in the word "saturation," or "a mixture full of different things," as it does in this instance. Roman *saturae* were staged variety shows that contained comedy about local people and situations. When Roman poet Lucilius added social commentary and personal attacks to his poetry (c.180 – c. 102 B.C.), satire began to take on a form more

similar to its contemporary style.[1] However, little is known of Lucilius' work because no complete texts have been found. Horace, though he lived later (65 – 8 B.C.), is considered the earliest writer of satire, since eighteen of his satirical poems have survived.[2] Rome's Juvenal, who lived in the first century A.D., is also considered one of the great satirists. Juvenal satirized wide-reaching subject matter such as the follies of the human race, as well as details as trivial as traffic problems[3] [4]

These ancient satirists and their modern-day counterparts share a common goal. The satirist hopes not only to entertain, but also to expose society's problems and shortcomings. In this way, the author hopes either that the target of the satire will change his or her ways or that the audience will compel the target to reform. Satirists believe that they are not only judges of the immoral, but defenders of the weak and voiceless. Satirists suppose that, while the average person may not be able to stand up for the good and the just, they can do so. These authors imagine themselves risking personal expense for the greater good of humanity.[5]

Satirists not only expose the follies of individuals or society, but some authors may offer solutions as well. According to Edward Bloom, "satire should tend not toward destruction, but toward renewal."[6] Gilbert Highet refers to this type of satirist as an optimistic satirist. Highet claims that this writer is a "physician," writing in order to heal. The optimistic satirist believes in the goodness of humanity, though some of man's ways need mending. Highet also describes a pessimistic satirist, whom he sees as an

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[1] Highet, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire.* Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 1962: p. 231
[2] Highet. p. 24
[3] Bloom, Edward A. and Bloom, Lillian D. *Satire's Persuasive Voice.* London. Cornell University Press, Ltd. 1979: p.40
[4] Highet. p.4
[5] Bloom. p.31
[6] Bloom. p. 31

"executioner." This misanthropic satirist looks at the world with contempt, and offers no solutions to its miseries, as he or she believes that the condition of the human race is inevitable. Highet points out, however, that the two types of satirists are not mutually exclusive. An author may write one piece as an optimist and another piece as a pessimist, or even take both points of view within the same work.[7]

Satire allows for variation in perspective, as well as variation in form. An essential characteristic of satire is that it is "in the language of its time."[8] As the popular form for entertainment has changed, so has the popular form of satire. Essays such as Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and books like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are products of their era, both in form and in content. Swift's work dealt with the overpopulation and poverty common in his day, while Huxley's futuristic dystopia centered on rapid technological advances and government influence in private life. Satire is unfailingly directed at the political and social climate in which it is written.[9] Popular forms of satire currently include political cartoons, sketch comedy, and late-night talk shows.

All of these forms, however, share various characteristics that make them satire. One of these elements is a claim of realism. Although characters are often exaggerated or stereotyped portrayals, they should appear real and viable to the audience.[10] For example, Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five,* is a pathetic soldier dressed up much like a clown. Billy would not have been a realistic character if he was dressed in this manner at the beginning of the novel. Instead, Billy

[7] Highet. pp. 235-237
[8] Highet. p.3
[9] Highet. p.16
[10] Highet. pp. 3-18, 231-233

gains his fur-collared coat and silver painted boots in an effort to stay warm along his journey. Later, when Vonnegut describes Pilgrim's ensemble, the audience is not surprised to find a soldier dressed up in this manner, and Vonnegut has created a viable illustration for the lack of honor and glory he sees in war.[11]

Several tools used in satire are irony, paradox, antithesis, and anticlimax. Satirical characters should be vividly portrayed, and if they are meant to parody a real person, do so unmistakably. [12] For instance, Saturday Night Live's Will Ferrell and Darryl Hammond portrayed George W. Bush and Al Gore respectively during the 2000 election. Both characters offered stereotyped portrayals of the politicians. Ferrell's Bush was a word-jumbling, overgrown frat boy, while Hammonds' Gore was intentionally stiff, boring, and bland.

The language of satire must also be clear and easily understood by the masses. Often this language is coarse and shocking in order to prove a point. For example, Jonathan Swift's essay *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public* discusses eating Irish babies as a solution to overpopulation and starvation, an approach designed to disturb his audience. Swift claims that children one-year of age would make a lovely dinner and that their flesh could be used to make handbags or ladies' gloves.[13]

Satire is also often vindictive and can be a personal attack by the author.[14] For example, Regan Publishing, which at one time offered to publish Monica Lewinsky's

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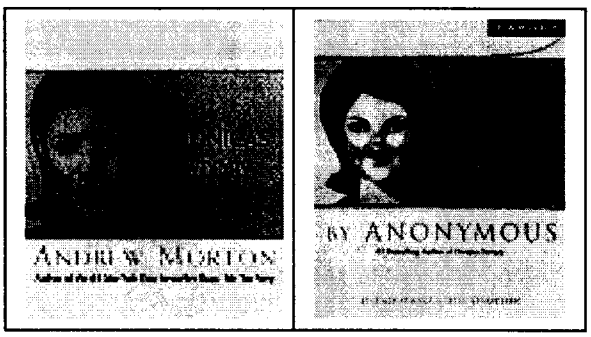
[11] Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five.* 1969, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence: New York, NY
[12] Bloom. p. 35
[13] Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*
[14] Highet. pp. 3-18, 231-233

story, later printed *Monica's Untold Story*, a parody version that was penned anonymously. The book was written in iambic pentameter and subtitled "An Amorality Tale."



Because social commentary is one of the major functions of satire, the genre is almost inherently political. Bloom points out that "strong leaders inevitably invite personal notoriety and assault," and therefore political figures make easy targets.[15] He also notes that satire has a democratizing effect; it gives a voice to the various groups and opinions within a society. Bloom states that political satire is often crude propaganda and rarely outlasts the day's news.[16] The impermanence of political satire is further complicated by censorship. Historically, those who were being satirized controlled the presses, and therefore many satirical works were never published. Some works circulate underground in these instances, but copies rarely survive the era in which they are written.

In countries that enjoy freedom of the press, however, satire has flourished and assumed many new forms. United States politicians are regularly parodied on shows such as *Saturday Night Live.* In 2001, Comedy Central premiered the first show dedicated to satirizing a single politician with *That's My Bush.* Political cartoons are another modern medium for political satire. Cartoons use caricatures of politicians and cartoon representations of current events to make political statements. A third environment for political satire is the late-night talk show. In the 2000 election, these shows became a candidate forum as well.

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[15] Bloom. p. 230
[16] Bloom. pp. 230-231

A Half-Century of Laughs: Late Night Talk Show History

The first late-night talk show was *Broadway Open House.* Sylvester (Pat) Weaver produced the show, which aired from May 1950 to August 1951. It used a combination of talk and variety show formats and was co-hosted by Jerry Lester and Morey Amsterdam. This format gradually evolved to become more conversationally oriented. The late-night format used today has its roots in *The Steve Allen Show.* When Allen's show was moved to daytime and eventually cancelled, Allen began doing a late-night broadcast for an NBC affiliate, which NBC adopted as the *Tonight! s*how in September, 1954.[17] Allen had his own orchestra, conducted by Bobby Byrne, and invited musicians and comedians to appear on his show. He also was the first entertainer to do a "man in the street"-style interview.[18] In 1956, Allen began working on a new *Steve Allen Show*, a musically oriented program designed by NBC to compete with the Ed Sullivan Show. NBC then brought in Ernie Kovacs to host the *Tonight!* Show two nights per week.[19] The network eventually changed the format of the show altogether by creating *Tonight: America After Dark.* Jack Lescoulie and later Al "Jazzbeaux" Collins hosted *America After Dark*, but the news- and events-oriented format lasted only six months.[20]

Beginning in July, 1957, Jack Paar became the host of *The Jack Paar Tonight Show.* Paar's version of the show centered on conversation rather than comedy and did not shy away from addressing political issues. John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were both guests on the show. Paar made headlines when he interviewed Fidel Castro and

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[17]Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1950-1957." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa041999.htm

[18] Celebrity Solutions, Inc, et al. "Steve Allen and Tonight." Copyright 2001. Steve Allen Online. Retrieved fromhttp://www.steveallen.com/main_page/index.html

[19]Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1950-1957." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa041999.htm

later broadcasted from the Berlin Wall. Paar walked off the show when NBC edited a joke without his prior consent. He returned a few weeks later, but left for good in 1962.[21]

After Paar's departure from *The Tonight Show,* the show aired for twenty-six weeks with a series of guest hosts. Johnny Carson then took over, with Ed McMahon as his announcer and Skitch Henderson as his bandleader. Carson spent thirty years on the show. During those years, Carson made several significant changes, including moving the show from New York to Los Angeles and choosing a sixty-minute show over the traditional ninety-minute format. Carson interviewed many celebrities, thanks largely to his new location. Carson's *Tonight Show* became the most popular show to ever grace that time slot. His relaxed demeanor contrasted sharply with Paar's temperamentality and won over late-night viewers. Carson also had the advantage of few serious competitors. *Jack Paar Tonite* and *Nightlife* were ABC's attempts to capture the time bracket, while FOX aired *The Late Show* with Joan Rivers, Arsenio Hall, and other hosts. CBS ran *The Merv Griffin Show* from 1969 to 1972, and then took a seventeen-year hiatus from late-night talk shows before introducing *The Pat Sajak Show,* which ran for only fifteen months.[22] Late late-night programming also emerged during Carson's era. Tom Snyder followed *The Tonight Show* with *Tomorrow* and *Tomorrow Coast to Coast* beginning in 1973. *Late Night with David Letterman* took over Snyder's slot in 1982.[23]

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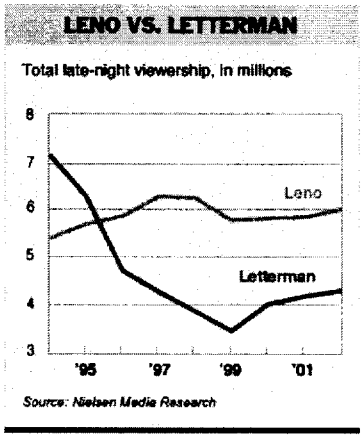
[20] Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1957-1962." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa042699.htm

[21] EagleVision, Inc. "Jack Paar: A Life Lived on Television" Jack Paar Website. Copyright 1999. Retrieved from http://jackpaar.com/Career/biography.html

[22] Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1972-1992." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa051099.htm

[23] Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1972-1992." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa051099.htm

Letterman, ready to assume *The Tonight Show* upon Carson's retirement, was upset when Jay Leno was signed to host the show. Letterman left NBC for CBS in 1993, at which point Conan O'Brien became the host of *Late Night.*[24] When *Late Show with David Letterman* premiered in July, *The Tonight Show* finally found a worthy competitor. Letterman brought bandleader Paul Schaffer and his famous "Top Ten Lists" with him from NBC. Segments such as "Biff Henderson's America," "Know Your Cuts of Meat," and "Stupid Human Tricks" made Dave a late-night favorite. During his first two years on CBS, Letterman was number one in late-night ratings.[25]



Flint, Joe. "Letterman-Leno Rivalry Drives the Current Late Show Drama. *Wall Street Journal.* 7 March 2002

Since that time, however, the *Late Show* has fallen behind *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* in ratings for twenty-six consecutive quarters.[26] *The Tonight Show* is, after all, the longest-running entertainment program on television. Branford Marsalis was Jay's bandleader until 1995, when Kevin Eubanks replaced him. Leno's regular spots include "Jaywalking," "Headlines," and "Virtual Jay." Leno's popularity may be due in part to his relaxed and approachable style. Acording to reporter Jason Gay, "He revels in this sort of folksiness; while it may be genuine, Leno also knows it works with viewers."[27]

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[24] Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1992-Present." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa051799.htm

[25] Halter, Belinda. "Late-Night Talk Shows 1992-Present." About.com Talk Shows. Copyright 2002. Retrieved From http://talkshows.about.com/library/weekly/aa051799.htm

[26] Lowry, Brian. "Leno's Late-night Streak Continues." 8 April, 2002. *The Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.calendarlive.com/top/1,1419,L-LATimes-TV-X!ArticleDetail-55647,00.html

[27] Gay, Jason. "The Hardest-Working, Least-Talked About, Most Popular Man in Showbusiness." *TV Guide.* April 13-19. 2002.

Other current late-night talk show hosts include Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show,* Bill Maher of *Politically Incorrect,* Conan O'Brien, who took Letterman's place at NBC, Craig Kilbourne of *The Late-Late Show,* and Carson Daly, whose show *Last Call* is NBC's newest late-night venture. However, these shows fail to capture audiences the size of Letterman's 4.2 million or Leno's 6 million viewers per minute.[28]

An Abrupt Shift in the Political Climate: The Events and Emotions of September 11, 2001

The events of September 11 changed the climate of American society. For years, many Americans had watched reports of suicide bombings on the news, but were confident that such things could not occur in their own country. Then, in a series of events beginning around 8:45 a.m., terrorists in four separate planes crashed into the two tallest towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and Somerset County in Pennsylvania. The two towers collapsed at 10:05 and 10:28 respectively.[29] As Americans watched, it quickly became obvious to them that their country was no longer invulnerable to this sort of attack. This realization, along with deep sadness regarding the day's events, sparked many emotions in the American public. Many were frightened or angry. Others were vengeful. Still others called for a renewed sense of patriotism out of the tragedy.

Several attitudes and behaviors changed as a result of the attacks. One study, conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres Intersearch, compared American actions and attitudes in their 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey to a follow-up survey done

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[28] Lowry, Brian. "Leno's Late-night Streak Continues." 8 April, 2002. *The Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.calendarlive.com/top/1,1419,L-LATimes-TV-X!ArticleDetail-55647,00.html

[29] Cable News Network. "Chronology of Terror." 12 September 2001 Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/chronology.attack/

in the wake of September 11. Fifty-one percent of people reported an increased trust in national government, a net gain of forty-four percent. (Some of this may reflect a change in Presidential administrations, however.) Nineteen percent more people reported trust in their local government, and fourteen percent more had faith in their local police force. Ten percent more people reported trusting their neighbors. Interest in politics rose fourteen percent, and hours watching television went up sixteen percent, although newspaper readership only went up three percent. More Americans reported volunteering, giving blood, working on community projects, and contributing to charity. The number of people donating to religious charities rose nine percent. [30]

Religious activity in general experienced a temporary spike. Church attendance in the weeks immediately following the incidents went up six percentage points, as did the number of people saying that religion was important in their lives. Bible sales increased as well. However, only eighteen percent of people said that they turned to the Bible for guidance during the tragedy. Additionally, fewer people reported believing that God had absolute power, and more said that they believed in the reality of a Satan or devil.[31]

A few Americans channeled the emotions stemming from the attacks into rage rather than religion. Several "hate-crimes," or violence based on bias against societal groups, occurred soon after September 11. For example, in April 2002, Mark Stroman was convicted and sentenced to death in the murder of Vasudev Patel, an Indian gas station owner. Stroman, who is also charged for shooting two other immigrants, admitted

[30] The Sagauro Seminar. "Survey of Post-September 11 Civic Ties reveals that community gains not at expense of inter-racial ties." John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. 15 January 2002. Retrieved from http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/Press.html

that the murder was fueled by his anger over the terrorist attacks.[32] When Frank Roque was arrested for killing a Lebanese taxi driver on September 15, 2001, he claimed that the murder was based on patriotism, saying, "I'm for America all the way." Overall, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee reported 520 cases of violence against Arab-Americans occurred as a result of September 11. These included battery, arson and at least six murders.[33] Hate groups also used the attacks as a recruiting tool. Hate rhetoric following the attacks blamed Jews and American ties to Israel, stirred Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim sentiments, and attributed the attacks to high levels of immigration. The Anti-Defamation League's Jay Kaiman stated that "these groups latch onto any current event to try in some warped way to make it work in their favor."[34]

In a time characterized by such strong emotions, prominent figures tried to find an appropriate response. President Bush condemned the attacks, calling them "the acts of cowards." He called for Americans to come together and respond to the tragedy with compassion.[35] Senate Majority and Minority Leaders, Tom Daschle and Trent Lott, issued a joint statement affirming a bipartisan effort to fight terrorism. Both parties, they said, condemned the actions of the terrorists and stood behind the President.[36] Religious leaders also lent support to the President following the terrorist attacks. Rev. Billy Graham stated his hope that the President and his advisors would be blessed with " divine

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[31] Witham. "Religious activity falling to pre-attack level, say polls." *The Washington Times*. 18 February 2002. Retrieved from http://www.washtimes.com/national/20020218-8741116.htm

[32] Reuters. "Texan gets death for killing Indian over Sept. 11" Yahoo! News. 5 April 2002. Retrieved from http://in.news.yahoo.com/020405/64/1kn3w.html

[33] American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. "ADC Fact Sheet: he Condition of Arab Americans Post 9/11." Retrieved from http://www.adc.org .

[34] Copeland, Larry. "Hate Groups using Sept. 11 to further causes." 27 November 2001. *USA Today*. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.usatoday.com/usatonline/20011127/3652154s.htm

[35] Bush, George W. Address to the Nation. 11 September 2002 Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/bush.speech.text/

[36] Daschle and Lott. Joint Statement. 13 September 2001.Yale Law School's Avalon Project. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/sept_11/joint_state.htm

wisdom as they respond to this insane and horrific act." Rev. Graham asked Americans to turn to their faith to help them through "the most terrible and devastating terrorist attack in its [America's] history."[37]

Another religious leader made a less appropriate statement. Rev. Jerry Falwell said on *The 700 Club* that the attacks were caused by "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America." Rev. Falwell later told the media that he was referring to the nation's relationship with God, and did not hold any individuals other than terrorists responsible for the attacks.[38] "I apologize," said Falwell, "that during a week when everyone appropriately dropped all labels and no one was seen as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, religious or secular, I singled out for blame certain groups of Americans."[39]

Bill Maher, the host of ABC's *Politically Incorrect* sits on the other end of the political spectrum from Falwell. However, like Falwell, Maher also received criticism for his comments following September 11. Maher was personally touched by the attacks when one of his scheduled guests died in the plane that hit the Pentagon. Maher replied to President Bush's statement that the terrorist were cowards by saying, "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away...That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."[40]

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[37] Graham, Rev. Billy. "Statement on Terrorist Attacks against the United States." 11 September 2001. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.billygraham.org/newsevents/news.asp?releasedate=20010911

[38] Cable News Network. "Falwell apologizes to gays, feminists, lesbians." 14 September 2001

[39] Falwell, Rev. Jerry. "Jerry Falwell Apologizes." 18 September 2001. *Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.nljonline.com/state.htm

[40] Armstrong, Mark. "Maher Causes Cowardly Flap." E! Online News. 20 September 2001. Retrieved from http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,8852,00.html

White House press secretary Ari Fleischer responded to Maher's comments by saying that "this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is."[41] Several sponsors including FedEx and Sears pulled their ads from the show, and the show itself was in jeopardy of being taken off of the air. Maher apologized, saying that he "should have been more specific" and that his remarks were directed at politicians rather than the military.[42]

Method of Examination of Monologue Jokes

Transcripts of monologues from *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *The Late Show with David Letterman* were collected from NewsMax.com, an internet archive of news and other pop culture materials. The transcripts spanned the six weeks before September 11 and the six weeks after late-night talk shows returned to television following the attacks. The monologues were delivered between July 31, 2001 to November 9, 2001. This totaled one hundred and forty monologues from the two entertainers. Jokes were first divided into Bush-related and non Bush-related categories. All non-related jokes were disregarded. All related jokes were divided into sub-categories based on their primary theme or themes. These themes were Bush's daughters, Bush's vacation, Bush's incompetence, Bush's intellect, Al Gore and the 2000 election, comparisons of Bush to Vice-President Dick Cheney, comparisons of Bush to Former President Bill Clinton, Bush's policies, and positive treatments of President Bush.

[41] Fleischer, Ari. Press Briefing. 26 September 2001. White House Press Release. Retrieved 2001 from http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010926-5.html#BillMaher-Comments

[42] Armstrong, Mark. "Maher Causes Cowardly Flap." E! Online News. 20 September 2001. Retrieved from http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,8852,00.html

Bush-isms: Making fun of the President Prior to September 11

As pointed out earlier, political notoriety invites satire. In the six weeks preceding September 11, David Letterman and Jay Leno targeted President George W. Bush fifty-one times in their opening monologue jokes. The comedians cited Bush's policies and his daughters' arrest, as well as labeling him incompetent, lazy, and unintellectual. The comedians compared Bush to former President Bill Clinton and accused him of being under the control of Vice President Dick Cheney.

The most common jokes were references to the President's month-long working vacation during the month of August. Jay Leno first targeted the Presidential vacation on Friday, August 3. Over the course of the next month, the vacation was cited in twenty-seven monologue jokes. The President was depicted as lazy and irresponsible. Leno declared that Bush would have to win another election just to finish out his first term[43] and that the President's time away from the White House seemed more like "summer camp" than a working vacation.[44] Letterman stated that the President was taking time to unwind and followed with the comment, "When the hell is this guy wound?"[45] Letterman also said he believed that the vacation would end January 20, 2005, the day

[43] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 7 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[44] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 22 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[45] Letterman, David. Opening monologue. *Late Show with David Letterman.* 20 August 2001. Monologue retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com

Bush's term comes to an end.[46] Leno joked that because of renovations at the White House, the greatest amount of work there would occur while the President was away.[47]

Jokes concerning the President's job performance while not on vacation were common, as well. Leno and Letterman made ten jokes about this in their respective opening monologues during the six weeks prior to September 11. When Bush received an honorary law degree and was inducted into the Little League Hall of Excellence, Letterman referred to him as "the honorary President" and "the Little League President," respectively.[48] [49] Leno suggested a "Take Your President to Work Day" during which Bush would learn all of the essential functions of the Presidency, like using the phone and copier.[50]

Intertwined with comments on Bush's job performance were fifteen monologue jokes about his intellect. After Bush's pre-vacation physical exam, Leno noted, "the MRI showed nothing, the CAT scan showed nothing, the x-ray of his head showed nothing."[51] Leno also stated that Bush's handicap in golf is "adding up the score"[52] and that Bush had called the king of Jordan to see when he would return to the NBA.[53] On one especially hot day, Leno stated that he was "sweating like George W. Bush at a Scrabble

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[46] Letterman, David. Opening monologue. *Late Show with David Letterman.* 22 August 2001. Monologue retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com.
[47] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 22 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[48] Letterman, David. Opening monologue. *Late Show with David Letterman.* 6 August 2001. Monologue retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[49] Letterman, David. Opening monologue. *Late Show with David Letterman.* 27 August 2001. Monologue retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[50] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 22 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[51] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 6 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[52] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 8 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com
[53] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 9 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com

tournament."[54] In Letterman's Top Ten Mexican Nicknames for George W. Bush, he listed "Guacamoron," "Tex-Mess," and "No Habla Ingles."[55]

Letterman and Leno made Bush jokes in several other categories, as well. Five monologue jokes dealt with Bush and the 2000 Presidential election. While discussing Al Gore's new beard, Leno commented that all sharp objects were taken away from Gore when he lost to Bush in the election.[56] Three jokes were directed at Bush's daughter who was arrested for trying to use a fake I.D.; seven focused on Bush's policy decisions concerning oil drilling, stem cell research, and the death penalty. Four monologue jokes were directed at the Vice President's role in the administration. For example, when Bush left for vacation, Bush stated that it was good for political leaders to get away from Washington for a while. Leno added, "Well, that's what Dick Cheney told him."[57]

A Laughing Matter? Humorists Respond To September 11

News coverage or reruns replaced many late-night talk shows during the week following the attacks. Upon their return, however, the shows' hosts realized the need for an appropriate response to the terrorism. Tony Fox of Comedy Central told the Associated Press "Irony is dead for the moment" in the wake of the attacks.[58] Shows that generally embraced humor took on a more serious tone for their first night back.

David Letterman was commended for his September 17, 2001 show, which some viewers thought "broke the ice" for candid discussion about the attacks. Letterman

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[54] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 17 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com

[55] Letterman, David. Top Ten List. *Late Show with David Letterman.* 6 September 2001. Top Ten List retrieved from http://www.cbs.com

[56] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 6 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com

[57] Leno, Jay. Opening monologue. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* 6 August 2001 Monologue Retrieved from http://www.newsmax.com

praised New York City for its courage, saying "If you didn't believe it before, you can believe it now: New York City is absolutely the greatest city on earth."[59] Letterman and his guest, Dan Rather, both wept during the show. When Rather apologized, saying that emotion was not appropriate for him as a news professional, Letterman replied, "Yeah, you're a professional, but good Christ, you're a human being."[60] Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* teared up as well, and apologized for being part of "another entertainment show beginning with an overwrought speech of a shaken host." Stewart's response described how the Statue of Liberty had replaced the Twin Towers in the view from his apartment.[61] In Jay Leno's first show back, he said "We're going to try to do some jokes tonight. It's going to be tough, but we've been through tough times before." He also noted that humor "is hard when you can't make fun of the politicians anymore."[62]

Like Leno, Jon Stewart also described a change in acceptable topics. "Subliminable is not a punch line anymore," he said, referring to jokes about George W. Bush's vocabulary.[63] CNN edited the transcript to one of Bush's speech in which he used the word "misunderestimated" three times.[64] Kenneth Auchincloss of *Newsweek* wrote, "the entertainment industry in general seemed ... fearful of any sign of insensitivity."[65]

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[58] Kim, Lillian. "Late-Show, PI, make and emotional return." 18 September 2001. Cable News Network. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/17/gen.letterman.return/

[59] Kim, Lillian. "Late-Show, PI, make and emotional return." 18 September 2001. Cable News Network. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/17/gen.letterman.return/

[60] Zacharek, Stephanie. "Dan Rather's tears." 18 September 2001. Salon.com Entertainment News. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/feature/2001/09/18/rather/

[61] Stewart, Jon. "Opening Monologue." 20 September 2001. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/thedailyshowwithjonstewart/dailyshow_sept11.jhtml

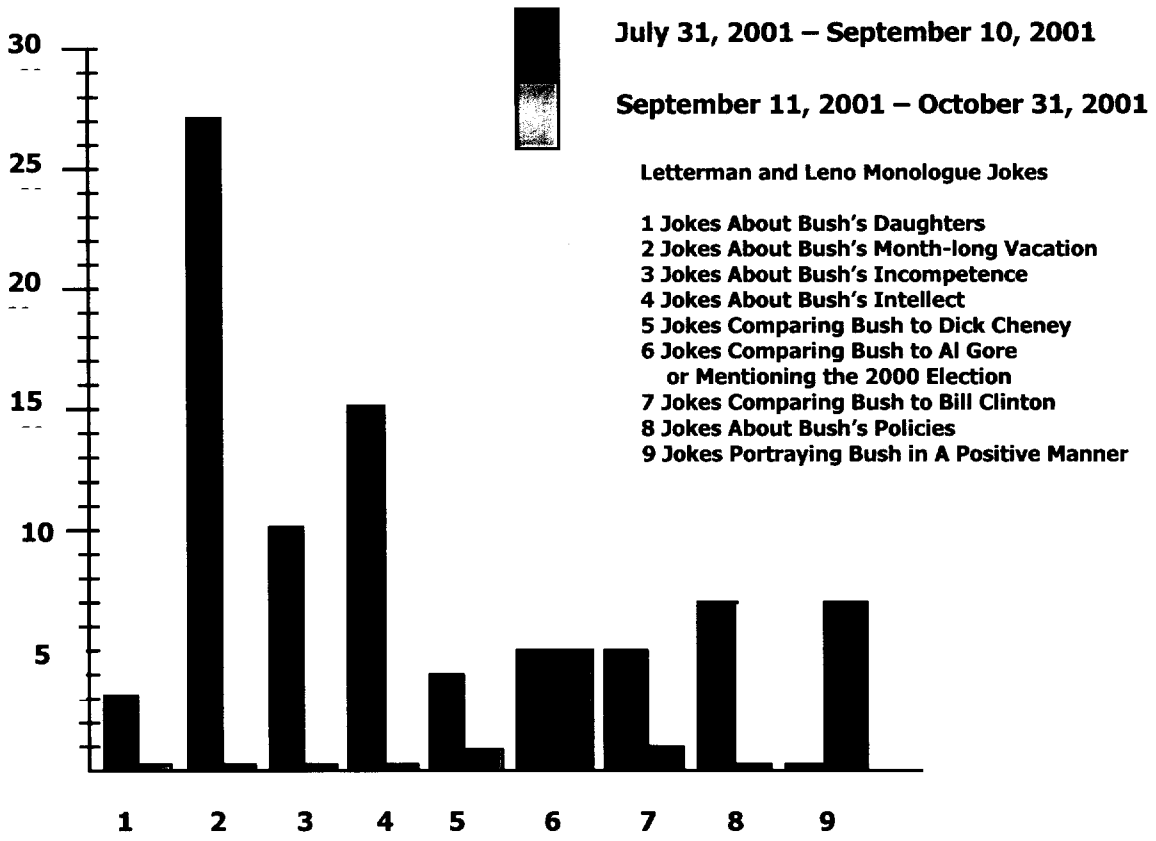
[62] Leno, Jay. Opening Monologue. 19 September 2001. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

[63] Stewart, Jon. "Opening Monologue." 20 September 2001. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.comedycentral.com/tv_shows/thedailyshowwithjonstewart/dailyshow_sept11.jhtml

[64] Goodman, Ellen. "Welcome Back." 2 October 2001. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.postwritersgroup.com/archives/good1002.htm

[65] Auchincloss, Kenneth. "Back on our feet." September 2001. *Newsweek.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.msnbc.com/news/634459.asp?0sp=w15b1

This fear showed in the late-night world. In the month and a half prior to the attacks, David Letterman and Jay Leno had made 51 jokes about George W. Bush in their opening monologues



. In the month and a half following the attacks, however, Jay Leno was the only one of the two humorists to make jokes concerning Bush. Still, these nine jokes were not directed so much at the President as the incredibly high approval ratings that he had. For example, Leno stated one evening "voters in Palm Beach are claiming that they voted for him." He said on another night that Bush's approval rating was "higher than Clinton's

ever was with his own family."[66] The most sarcastic comment of the nine was Leno's assertion that Bush "actually told Dick Cheney what to do." This joke still paled in comparison to Leno's past remarks about Bush. The 2000 election was the most-used focus of about the President. Even then, however, most jokes targeted Al Gore rather than Bush. For instance, Leno joked that after Bush's remarkable approval ratings, Gore carried around a picture of the President in his wallet and claimed that they were once close friends.[67] Leno and Letterman both shifted the focus of their jokes toward Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban.

Though Leno still made subtle Bush jokes, he was also very complimentary to the President in several instances. "People rise to the occasion," Leno said about Bush's address to the nation following the attacks.[68] Leno also stated that George W. Bush jokes were a thing of the past because "he's smart now."[69] Letterman avoided the subject of Bush altogether, and instead focused on New York City and patriotism. "Even the crack dealers are selling American flags,"[70] Letterman said, "Support New York City! Go out to an adult theater."

Leno and Letterman's treatment of the President changed beyond whether or not he was the target of jokes. The frequency with which the two humorists mentioned Bush in a non-humorous manner increased greatly after September 11. The comedians mentioned Bush casually four times in the month and a half before the event, but nineteen

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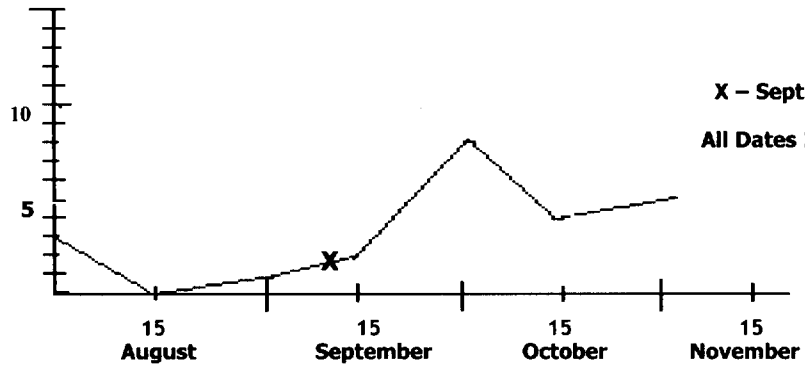
[66] Leno, Jay. Opening Monologue. 25 September 2001 and 26 September 2001. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

[67] Leno, Jay. Opening Monologue. 1 October 2001. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

[68] Leno, Jay. Opening Monologue. 21 September 2001. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

[69] Leno, Jay. Opening Monologue. 24 September 2001. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

times in the month and a half after the attacks. These mentions include Bush appointing a new FBI director and throwing out the first pitch in the World Series.



Frequency of Non-Humorous Mention of George W. Bush in Letterman and Leno Monologues

All Joking Aside: Conclusions

Using the genre of satire as a lens, we can better understand the reasons for and implications of the change in comedians' treatment of the President. Most relevant to this discussion is the idea that satire is a product of the political and social culture in which it is created. The culture of the United States was very different before and after September 11. Prior to that day, Americans took national security for granted. Many in the United States considered government an annoyance rather than vital to their personal protection. Additionally, some Americans were also apathetic about political participation in general. In 1996, the League of Women voters conducted a survey in which twenty-seven percent of people admitted that given the choice, they would opt to stay home and watch television rather than vote.[71]

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[70] Letterman, David. Opening Monologue. 27 September 2001. *Late Show with David Letterman.* Retrieved 2002 from http://www.newsmax.com

[71] Nichols, Mike. "Those who don't vote just don't get it." 9 April 2002. *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=85a51b2e964ea89e6b6a216491bda9ba&_docnum=28&wchp=dGLSzS-lSlAl&_md5=9fc3681e908c2d7d430cd16a1539fd8e

The tragedy of September 11, however, sparked a renewed sense of patriotism and faith in government. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that "even on college campuses, where disillusionment with the government's foreign and environmental policies has been taking shape through the years, Americanism was the rage" after September 11.[72] *The Columbus Dispatch* stated that the attacks "helped Americans see themselves in a way they haven't in a generation or more."[73]

This change in the socio-political climate of the country resulted in a change to satire. Americans who lived in this climate would not laugh at the same jokes that had entertained them a day before. A powerful sense of renewed patriotism made any form of political criticism seem petty, if not inappropriate. This cultural turnabout greatly influenced humorists' decisions concerning their portrayals of Bush.

Culture's role in forming satire is also very important in understanding the differences between the reactions of David Letterman and Jay Leno. Leno's studios in Los Angles were more than 2,800 miles removed from the tragedy, while Letterman sat just a few miles from ground zero. Letterman focused primarily on how the attacks affected New York City. He reiterated the need for people to support the city, and how everyone was doing their individual best to help. Letterman's decisions concerning what to air were products of his close proximity to the situation. Leno had more of a national focus, and concentrated on ways that America was returning to normal. Leno's distance

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[72] Rinaldi, Mark. "From Anxiety to Patriotism, Attacks Transformed our Culture." 30 December 2001. *The St. Louis Pos-Dispatch.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document? _m=aa40686773810b97bb05c8399d717ba0&_docnum=7&wchp=dGLStV-lSlzV&_md5=ff3378f3532bef04724d0f575b5a5968

[73] Editorial. "Patriotism Reborn." 27 December 2001.*The Columbus Dispatch.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=aa40686773810b97bb05c8399d717ba0&_docnum=16&wchp=dGLStV-lSlzV&_md5=053b86ecdfd6f84eb0ecc70f7a148847

from New York affected his viewpoint and decisions about how to treat Bush in his monologues.

The purpose of satire also contributed to the comedians' political statements after the events. Satire is often designed to urge influential leaders to mend their ways. However, when these leaders prove that they are capable of performing to the standards expressed by the satirist, satire no longer serves in that role. When George W. Bush stepped up to the task of leading the country through a difficult time, he ceased to be a target for those who felt he was not a competent leader.

Bush also proved that he was a multi-dimensional president. He gave many speeches and met with several world leaders in the days to immediately following September 11. In this way, he overcame the stereotyped portrayals that satire often relies upon. Additionally, the personal attack element of satire was diminished because no one wished to be considered unpatriotic by attacking Bush.

Leno and Letterman' treatment of Bush is also important because of the current focus on entertainment-based programs to provide news coverage. Early in 2002, ABC sought to bring David Letterman's show to their network. The campaign stirred emotions in the media world; the move would have displaced *Nightline*, the only non-cable news program in that time slot. *Nightline* held higher ratings than Letterman's show, however, the older audience brought fewer advertising dollars to the network.[74] Robert Iger, the president of the Walt Disney Company (ABC's parent corporation), estimated that

[74] Folkenflik, David. "Nightline gets ABC support." 9 April 2002. *The Baltimore Sun.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=b4381b40414100ebaea9cf314ffa2637 &_docnum=18&wchp=dGLSzS-lSlAl&_md5=726aae8e6c2c57dee78c59ec1d7d276c

Letterman's move would have brought in nearly half of a billion dollars to the network over the next five years.[75]

The willingness of the network to sacrifice a hard news program for a comedy-based show reflects the current entertainment-oriented culture. During ABC's negotiations with Letterman, Carroll Doherty of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press commented, "If it occurs, the statement from the network no doubt will be, 'This doesn't represent a diminution in news in any way,' but the facts are pretty obvious."[76] Nightline's host Ted Koppel commented on the shift away from news as well. Koppel affirmed his sentiments that networks ignore foreign news for domestic news and entertainment. "It's easy, it's cheap and people do seem to be watching," said Koppel, pointing out that it is often "convenient" for networks to believe that the public is not interested in foreign affairs.[77]

Cable channel Comedy Central poked fun at the tendency of Americans to look to entertainment programs for information. For example, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* ran an ad campaign calling the show a broadcast "where more Americans get their news than probably should." CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer also discussed the impact of comedy on public perception during the 2000 election. "There's no doubt that all this comedy has an impact. Elections are won and lost on public perceptions in that kind of popular

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[75] Verrier and Lowry. "Strained Relationship with News." 31 March 2002. *The Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 2002 from

[76] Lowry and Jensen. "Letterman Bid Reflects ABC's Shift From News." 2 March 2002. *The Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=6cd17bd964eb81e3c de9726ff583cf56&_docnum=9&wchp=dGLSzS-lSlAl&_md5=eb8fc983f2212ce97d229467d9485d5c

[77] Lowry and Jensen. "Letterman Bid Reflects ABC's Shift From News." 2 March 2002. *The Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=6cd17bd964eb81e3c de9726ff583cf56&_docnum=9&wchp=dGLSzS-lSlAl&_md5=eb8fc983f2212ce97d229467d9485d5c

culture."[78] According to *U.S. News and World Report*, almost half of Americans under thirty years of age got their political news from late-night talk shows[79].

According to communications theorist Maxwell McCombs, "Not only do people learn factual information about public affairs and events in the world from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic from the emphasis placed on it in news coverage."[80] That is to say that when the media dedicates airtime to a certain topic, the public begins to see that topic as relevant. Thus, when the President is portrayed in a certain manner by the press or talk-show hosts, public perception bends to see that portrayal as significant. The basic premise of agenda-setting theory is that the media does not tell the public what to think, but what to think *about.* This is also known as issue salience. If the public is led to think about Bush's intellect, for example, they may begin to question his intelligence. However, they may not have had the topic not been introduced by the media.

The treatment of the forty-third President of the United States by late-night talk show hosts is relevant then, because the public looks to these figures for news coverage. The topics that they cover become the issues that Americans consider. In this way, it is obvious that Letterman and Leno not only responded to the emotions of Americans following the terrorist attacks, but also fueled American patriotism and support for the President with their remarks.

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[78] Sella, Marshall. "The Stiff Guy vs. The Dumb Guy." 24 September 2000. *The New York Time.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=146573e1c0598d9846 34b2057d6dbd4a&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLStk-lSlAl&_md5=aa736442922ad7f92f4bf6260602f561

[79] Editors. "Dumb and Dumber?" 20 March 2000. *U.S. News and World Report.* Retrieved 2002 from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=587cdbc25769235879955cc2557fe5af &_docnum=38&wchp=dGLStk-lSlAl&_md5=1c4fe85278865fd242c8cbc697ccb073

[80] McCombs, Maxwell. "New Frontiers in Agenda Setting: Agendas of Attributes and Frames," Paper presented at the Senior Scholars Session, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass

Epilogue

On January 14, 2002, the silence of humorists was broken when the President choked on a pretzel, passed out, and sustained bruises and carpet burn to his face. Both Letterman and Leno feasted on pretzel jokes for the next few shows. Letterman claimed that the pretzel had conspiratorial ties to Germany and Iraq. Leno even quipped about the President's intellect, saying that the incident follows Bush's pattern of "choking on vowels."[81]

The pretzel incident signaled to Americans that their highest political leader was once again an appropriate target for political satire. From that point, Bush jokes were once again abundant. Columnist Charles Gordon summed up the situation when he wrote, "This is North America and we can only be respectful of authority for so long. Then we snap."[82]

Communication (Chicago, 1997). Retrieved 2002 fromhttp://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/faculty/facul/McCombs/Agenda_Setting.html

[81] Young, Doug. "Pretzel provides all kinds of humor twists." 18 January 2002. *The San Diego Union Tribune.* Retrieved 2002 from

[82] Gordon, Charles. "Not even the most popular president can survive a snack attack." 17 January 2002. *The Ottawa Citizen.* Retrieved 2002 from

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Abstract

This paper explores the changes in treatment of President George W. Bush by late-night talk show hosts after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2002. Twelve weeks worth of monologues from David Letterman and Jay Leno are examined using genre of political satire as the primary method of explanation. The initial sections of the paper deal with the histories of both political satire and late-night talk shows respectively. The intermediate sections of the paper discuss the events of September 11 and the comedians' monologues before and after the tragedy. Finally, the paper uses the genre of political satire to explain variations in the treatment of President Bush.

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