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Jon Stewart Is Getting Serious



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COMEDY CENTRAL

What will we do without Jon Stewart?

I hear that a lot. Of course I hope his writers will be able to make more magic with his successor, Trevor Noah. And no matter what happens on *The Daily Show*, we will still have John Oliver and Larry Wilmore, and I'm praying that Stephen Colbert will find room for political satire on *The Late Show*. We can keep counting on the openers on *Saturday Night Live*, the closers on Bill Maher and the vicious brilliance of *South Park*. But the question remains: How will we survive the mendacity and imbecility of American politics and the media that cover it without Jon Stewart?

But as his last show approaches, Stewart himself has been turning that question inside out. We may laugh at the emperor's nakedness, but so what? He's still emperor. A montage of clips can eviscerate hypocrisy. Wit can slice the stuffing from a bully. Evidence can unmask ignorance; analysis can debunk deception; and sometimes a pun or a snort can kick a candidate or a correspondent in the *kishkes*. But really: besides a little laughter making us feel a little better, what difference does that make to our lives? With the end of his 17-year run in sight, that's the doubt Stewart himself has been wrestling with.

To be sure, his swansong is also providing comedy. "Thank you, Donald Trump, for making my last six weeks my best six weeks," he said when the imaginary billionaire announced his bid for the Republican presidential nomination. It seemed to surprise Stewart when the line drew a moan of protest from the audience, as if to say, No, Jon, it's not funny that you're leaving us. His response: "No, he's putting me in some kind of comedy hospice where all I'm getting is just straight morphine."

Stewart Unbound has no fear of alienating prospective guests. "Who knew," he said, "all you had to do to fire up Harry Reid - the human equivalent of dry toast - was mention trade agreements? If I'd have known that, I'd have mentioned it earlier and kept myself from falling asleep every time I interviewed him." The intake of breath that came with the laugh he got prompted this: "Yeah, that's right, this is what it's like when someone's at five weeks left, people. Get used to it. Fuck it, I'm outta here."

But twice during the last couple of weeks, Stewart has gone serious on us, and delved into what *The Daily Show* — or any political satire — is good for.

Now that he's in the final run of shows, he said on June 11, he's been thinking about things he's done right and done wrong. Among the latter: his interview with Donald Rumsfeld. Stewart had thought he could dissolve an architect of the Iraq War "into a puddle of atonement" by confronting him with "the most Socratic line of questioning." As it turned out, Rummy easily evaded him, leaving Stewart thinking he'd never get his chance again. But when Rumsfeld told the *Times of London* earlier this month that "the idea that we could fashion a democracy in Iraq seemed to me unrealistic," Stewart pounced on his retroactive skepticism: "Time for Stewart v Rumsfeld, Round 2: The Grudge Match."

The pounding Stewart gave him was a classic *Daily Show* deconstruction. Rumsfeld ran to Fox to deny the *Times of London* quote; he claimed that what he'd actually said was, "I didn't want the Iraqis to believe, inaccurately, that the U.S. intends to impose its form of democracy on their country." And where might Iraqis have inaccurately gotten that impression? Cue Rumsfeld clips touting American-style democracy for Iraq on April 10, 2003, November 23, 2004, December 8, 2004, February 6, 2005 and March 20, 2005. Knockout. "I never thought I would say this," Stewart crowed, "but we got you, Donald Rumsfeld, we got you."

But as "We Got Him!" and fireworks flashed on the screen, Stewart found himself unable to gloat, calling it a "strangely hollow" win. "You know," he said, "I placed a lot of stock in the idea" that catching Rumsfeld — or Bush, Cheney or Rice, or Douglas Feith or Judith Miller, or Richard Perle or Paul Bremer or any of the other architects or enablers of the Iraq War — "in some sort of logical trap, or forcing them to admit the errors of their ways, would be an ultimate victory. But now I wonder.... If you can get one of these guys to admit their mistakes, you may have a moment of satisfaction and catharsis. But it doesn't mitigate the horrible consequences of the decision, and doesn't seem to stop the next guy from repeating the mistake."

So why do it? His answer recalls the punishment of Sisyphus, forced to push a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down again, condemned to useless labor for all eternity:

"People of the future: Is it futile to try to pin these people down? Yes. Would it be easier to give up and let Rumsfeld go, preferably on an ice floe in the North Atlantic? Yes. Because no matter what evidence, no matter what arguments or historical facts you put in front of these people, they think learning curves are for pussies. And even if they did learn, it wouldn't change the past, or prevent the same mistakes in the future. Which is why I want to say to you, in the future: Please, never stop trying anyway. Because there's always hope that one day, they'll think, just for a second, and that second will be enough time for us to shove those motherrfuckers onto that ice floe."

Albert Camus said that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." In an absurd world, the struggle itself — the struggle toward the heights, not victory — "is enough to fill a man's heart." Must one imagine Stewart, like Sisyphus, happy?

Last week, on the day that nine African-Americans were slaughtered in their Charleston church by a white supremacist, a somber Stewart quieted his audience at the show's start. I have a pretty simple job, he said.

"I come in in the morning, and we look at the news, and I write jokes about it.... But I didn't do my job today, so I apologize. I got nuthin' for you.... And maybe if I wasn't nearing the end of the run, or this weren't such a common occurrence, maybe I could get pulled out of the spiral, but I didn't. And so I honestly have nothing other than just sadness once again that we have to peer into the abyss of the depraved violence that we do to each other, and the... gaping racial wound that will not heal yet we pretend doesn't exist. I'm confident that by acknowledging that, by staring into it, we still won't do jackshit. Yeah, that's us.... You know this is going to go down the same path."

It's kin to a sentiment that President Obama — another short-timer contemplating the end of his run — was criticized for voicing. I find no more reason to be optimistic about gun control or racism than they do. No evidence, arguments or historical facts, and no comedy, will defeat the gun lobby and its enablers; learning curves are for pussies.

But there are other ways to confront evil: Stewart spent the rest of the show interviewing Malala Yousafzi, the 17-year-old Pakistani shot in the head by the Taliban for promoting education for girls. She survived, won the Nobel Peace Prize and launched the Malala Fund. The power of ridicule, Stewart rightly says, has dispiriting limits. But Stewart also possesses the power of attention. In the clamorous info-marketplace, nothing is more scarce, or more valuable, than attention. By giving her his platform, Stewart cleared a quiet place for us to hear her story and learn hope from her.