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Waiting for Sanityman: Can Jon Stewart Save America?

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The fate of our country won't be decided by a politician. It will be determined by a comedian.

Not long before Jon Stewart announced his Rally to Restore Sanity, he told a *New York* magazine writer why he and his crew on *The Daily Show* would never do something like that. "We're not activists," he said. "Maybe the nice thing about being a comedian is never having full belief in yourself to know the answer. So you can say all this stuff, but underneath, you're going, 'But of course, I'm f---ing idiotic.' It's why we don't lead a lot of marches."

Stewart's about-face is a risky move. Though something like 100,000 people quickly posted on the rally's Facebook page that they'd come, that's not the same thing as actually showing up on the National Mall on Oct. 30. The Web site Politico, a bellwether of Beltway groupthink, oblivious of saying exactly the kind of thing that Stewart loves to singe, predicted that the "media narrative"

about Stewart's rally would depend on whether he musters a bigger crowd on the National Mall than Glenn Beck's Restoring Honor rally did.

But more than bragging rights about followers are at stake. Liberal-leaning Salon.com asked, "Have Stephen Colbert" — convener of a dueling March to Keep Fear Alive — "and Jon Stewart crossed the line?" Warning that "at a certain point even sarcasm jumps the shark," the writer — who "would eat a bowl of broken glass just to touch the hem of Stewart or Colbert's pants" — nevertheless cautioned that "it's tough to tread in the muck of parody and not wind up bearing an uncanny resemblance to the things we despise," and that unless the rally motivates a Democratic get-out-the-vote effort, it will be "a Comedy Central-fueled ego trip."

What made Stewart change his mind? Clever promotion for *Earth (The Book)*, as Politico says "skeptics" will assume? I don't think so. Stewart's new book would likely have topped the *New York Times* best-seller list without it. Count me as one of those glass-eaters, too, but I suspect he set aside his fear of being "f—ing idiotic" because there's a bit of a rivalry going on between two Jon Stewarts, and one of them — Sanityman — was feeling his oats.

That Jon Stewart sounds a lot like the Obama who became a rock star by calling for an end to all the shouting and divisiveness: "We are not red states and blue states; we are the United States of America." This is the Stewart whose "call to reasonableness" maintains that our country's problems "have real, if imperfect, solutions that I believe 70 to 80 percent of our population could agree to try and could ultimately live with." What keeps those solutions out of reach is that the 70 to 80 percenters "have s—t to do," and lead normal lives, which means that, "unfortunately, the conversation and process is actually controlled by the other 15 to 20 percent."

When he announced the rally, to illustrate the 15-to-20-percenters, he rolled a montage of big mouths — Chris Matthews, Sean Hannity, Alan Grayson, Newt Gingrich, Tea Party shouters and lots more. Tucked in among them, for only a couple of seconds toward the end, was Jon Stewart himself, backed up by a gospel choir, excerpted from a segment in which he told Bernie Goldberg and his Fox News colleagues, "Go f— yourselves." Including his own cameo was

his way of giving a sly shout-out to the other Jon Stewart, the take-no-prisoners host of *The Daily Show*. That Stewart — Jugular Jon — is the one who hammered Senator John “I-never-considered-myself-a-maverick” McCain for selling his soul, but it was Sanityman who asked Meghan McCain to give her dad a scented mash note making up.

Jugular Jon — the one I have a man crush on — isn’t a knee-jerk partisan. He’s plenty rough on Obama and Democrats when he thinks they deserve it, which is surprisingly often. Nor does he inhabit a bubble. He goes out of his way to invite the Mike Huckabees and Dick Armeys onto his show, the better to wipe the floor with them in person.

Now I’m all for civil discourse and the search for common ground. Sanityman is right: The noisy outliers in our nation make such terrific ratings bait, and politicians and bullies are so thoroughly reliant on wedge issues that polarize us, that when most people look in the media mirror, they don’t see themselves. So it’s great that reasonableness will get a few hours on the Mall, with Colbert’s blowhard to spice up the picnic.

But I’ll be bummed if Sanityman succeeds in throwing a wet blanket on Jugular Jon’s fire. I’m not convinced that what we need now is Bipartisan Barack 2.0, and it appears that neither, thank goodness, is the president. I don’t know if it’s too late, but I’m glad the Obama who got played over and over again by his nihilistic opposition seems to be finding his voice again on the campaign trail.

I don’t think there’s an 80 percent consensus on anything in this country, unless it’s stated so abstractly that you can carve it in marble. Sure, we all agree on fiscal responsibility, but today there’s a divide, not confined to a bellicose fringe, on whether our progressive tax system actually amounts to redistributionist crypto-socialism. Everyone wants a clean environment and energy independence, but toss the idea of a stiff tax on gas into a sanity rally, or raise the prospect of tougher regulation, and the mellow would quickly curdle. These may seem to be differences about means, not ends, but they’re really differences in our underlying beliefs about markets and governments, freedom and responsibility, me and we.

Kumbaya has become a synonym for naiveté not because it's a hippie relic, but because it trivializes the real — not superficial or trumped-up — fissures in our polity, and because it discounts the crippling dysfunctions of our system, like the place of money in politics and the tyranny of the filibustering minority. Yes, it's true, and grist for comedy, that most Americans — unlike the whack jobs on cable — have other things to do than politics, and it'll be a real up to see Normal Nation on the Mall. But dealing with the mess on our national hands will take nothing less than the kind of heroic local organizing we saw in 2008, including a massive remobilization of young people. It'll also take the sober realization that “enemy” is not so wrong a name for the billionaires whose fun at the casino wrecked, and almost destroyed, our economy, and for the oligarchs who pull the strings of their political and media puppets.

The host of *The Daily Show* — the scorched-earth satirist who flays fools four nights a week — knows that. Jon Stewart may be the best journalist on national TV in America, and if you won't give me “best,” then I'll take “most necessary.” I know, I know: It's ridiculous to lump reporters, columnists, network anchors, cable yakkers, comedians and the rest of the journalistic menagerie into the same category. Besides, Stewart insists that he's the fake anchor of a fake news show. But if you think of journalism as the fourth estate — as a precious antidote to the poisoning of democracy — then *The Daily Show* comes closest to the kind of public discourse we most need right now.

That's not because the show is uniquely satirical; Colbert, *Saturday Night Live*, Bill Maher and Letterman (not to mention *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane) also do political satire, and often brilliantly. Nor is Stewart alone in being unafraid to make judgments or exert moral authority; MSNBC's anchors have skin in the game, too, and no one's more intellectually fearless than Bill Moyers. What's peerless about *The Daily Show* troupe is their craft, the way they construct arguments and use video. Their storytelling m.o. has rejuvenated — transformed — what news can be.

At its simplest, *The Daily Show* weapon of choice is the montage, the juxtaposition of today's footage with file footage. Getting away with hypocrisy depends on amnesia, but Google plus digital video search equals

accountability. When the Republicans issued their Pledge to America last month, Stewart lethally skewered its “new ideas” hype by intercutting, word for word, John Boehner in 2010 spouting the exact same rhetoric as John Boehner in 1998. No wonder David Gregory showed that devastating clip when he had the pledge’s spokesman, Congressman Mike Pence (R-Ind.), on *Meet the Press* the following Sunday. The mainstream media interview format is an inherently inconclusive he-said/he-said ritual posing as fact-finding. The Boehner montage was the question that answered itself.

One of *The Daily Show*’s best-known deployments of video was Stewart’s 2009 demolition of CNBC’s *Mad Money* host, Jim Cramer. The thrill was that much of it happened in real time, with Cramer as a guest on the set. Stewart rolls tape of Cramer admitting to short selling when he was a hedge fund manager, and asks him, “What does that mean?”

Cramer: I have been trying to reign-in short selling, trying to expose what really happens ... trying to get the regulators to look at it. ...

Stewart: That’s interesting. Roll 2:10.

Cramer (in clip): I would encourage anyone in a hedge fund unit: Do it, because it’s legal. It is a very quick way to make money, and very satisfying. By the way, no one else in the world would ever admit that, but I don’t care.

When Cramer complains that insiders came on his show and lied to him, Stewart is ready with tape of Cramer saying, “You can’t foment. You can’t create, yourself, an impression that a stock’s down. But you do it anyway, because the SEC doesn’t understand it.” Then Stewart shows Cramer demonstrating how to foment Apple stock.

Here’s how Stewart ended the segment:

“I understand that you want to make finance entertaining, but it’s not a f—ing game. When I watch that, I get, I can’t tell you how angry that makes me because [what] it says to me is, ‘You all know.’ You all know what’s going on ... and so now to pretend that this was some sort of crazy, once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that nobody could have seen coming is disingenuous at best and criminal at worst. ... These guys in these companies were on a

Sherman's March through their companies financed by our 401(k)s, and all the incentives of their companies were for short-term profit. And they burnt the f---ing house down with our money, and walked away rich as hell, and you guys knew that was going on."

Now that's what I call sanity.

It's delicious when Stewart uses his targets' own logic to decimate them. When *Fox & Friends* played guilt-by-association to connect Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf with Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran — thus corroborating the claim by Fox's Dick Morris that Cordoba House "is literally a command center for terrorism" — Stewart used the same paranoid reasoning (though with actual facts), and the same crackpot prop (an index card and yellow highlighter), to link scary-seeming Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal to *Fox & Friends'* own employer, Rupert Murdoch: Alwaleed is the second-largest shareholder in News Corp. outside the Murdoch family.

A few days later, on the same *Fox & Friends* couch, two former Bush administration spokespersons now on Fox's payroll, Dana Perino and Dan Senor, warned that the sinister Kingdom Foundation, which "funds radical madrassas" all over the world, was funding Imam Rauf. Why, Stewart asked, was the actual name of the evil head of the Kingdom Foundation not mentioned on the show? Perhaps because if they had identified him, anyone would have been able to Google up pictures of the Kingdom Foundation's director, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, shaking hands with Rupert Murdoch and holding hands with George W. Bush. Were Perino and Senor simply stupid and just didn't know that Alwaleed runs the Kingdom Foundation, or are they truly evil and suppressing a fact that didn't support their fear-mongering narrative? The ensuing debate between *The Daily Show* correspondents John Oliver and Wyatt Cenack, one wearing a T-shirt saying "TEAM STUPID," the other wearing "TEAM EVIL," capped a brilliant take-down of Fox that no "real" news network had the insight, wit or courage to produce.

During the 2008 campaign, Stewart showed footage of Dick Morris accusing Hillary Clinton of sexism, and then called Morris "a lying sack of s---." Is that Stewart necessary right now? Yes. The other Stewart, the one who wants Tea Partiers to come to his sanity rally because "we're not enemies, we're all working toward the same goals" — is that who this moment cries out for? Not

so much. Sometimes real righteousness is required — not the hey-kids-let's-put-on-a-rally impishness that disses the gravitas of Stewart's fans, but the passion that honors the patriotism and stokes the fires of his flock.

In a *Time* online poll whose legitimacy it's easy to imagine him destroying, Jon Stewart was named "the most trusted man in America." Even in scientific polls, Americans rank him alongside the highly compensated broadcast network anchors whose audiences always dwarf his. Stewart has only 1.8 million viewers. But according to Pew research, they're more knowledgeable about current events than the audience of almost every other source of news. Some people are alarmed to hear that young people think they're getting real news from *The Daily Show*, that they're more likely to watch Stewart than, say, the *PBS News Hour*, or than to read the *New York Times*. Those are superb, equally essential custodians of sanity. Without them, and the other sources of information on all the platforms where people graze all day long, it would be much harder, maybe impossible, to get the jokes that Stewart tells. But people do get those jokes. Something's going right.

A few years back, a phenomenon called the "*The Daily Show* effect" migrated from the academic research that coined it to the larger national conversation. Social scientists were concerned that Stewart's relentless satire fostered cynicism in his viewers. It seems to me that those scholars misidentified the source of Americans' dyspeptic mistrust of our leaders. The conduct of politicians, and the bankrupt system that corrupts them, and the news media that cover the fate of American democracy as though it were a cheesy reality show: those are the real (and appropriate) sources of our cynicism. Sanity, and patriotism, spring from the sass of a Stewart, from the character Colbert plays, from the kids calling out the emperors' nakedness, and from all the citizens heading to the Mall on Oct. 30 filled with unironic, vulnerable, passionate last-ditch hope.

Update: HuffPo is offering free NY/DC buses for the rally - reportedly worth \$250k. I wonder what the cash equivalent of Fox's promotion of Glenn Beck's rally would be.