

Jon Stewart Was a Searing Media Critic, but Don't Call Him a Progressive

There's no denying Jon Stewart's brilliance as a satirist and media critic, but his show also dismissed many of the most important grassroots movements of the past 15 years.

BY BEN DAVIS



When did Jon Stewart ascend from late-night comedian to Jon Stewart, Very Important Media Personality, the character we send off tonight? Super-fans **might argue** his VIMP status came via his nimble coverage of the absurdities of the 2000 election, which saw Stewart sharpen considerably from his 1999 debut season. Those who have tracked him less closely might put Stewart's VIMP certification later, say 2009, when a sitting president visited for the first time. I think it was 2004.

That was a big year for left-liberal satire in general. Michael Moore released *Fahrenheit 9/11*, an open bid to unseat George W. Bush. Meanwhile, a bunch of aspiring media moguls launched Air America, an attempt to create a liberal counterpoint to the right-wing talk-radio echo chamber, anchored by *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot* author Al Franken and his show, the "O'Franken Factor."

"We know that they are lying, lying without shame, lying with impunity, safe in the knowledge that there is no watchdog with a platform large enough to call them on

their willful untruths," Franken intoned in the **inaugural minutes** of his show, speaking of the right-wing media machine. "Someday we will find that watchdog. Until then, I will have to do."

By 2004, the bumptious extremism of the Bush II years had created a job opening in the liberal imagination for an anti-O'Reilly or anti-Rush. But Franken would stumble around on air without gaining traction, before decamping for Congress, while Stewart caught fire via **his storied appearance** on CNN's splenetic debate show *Crossfire*.

The Daily Show host's confrontation with baby-faced conservative Tucker Carlson and supine liberal pitchman Paul Begala was reported on as a bone fide Media Event. Having mocked *Crossfire* on his program, Stewart was invited on for a special appearance, clearly an attempt to diffuse him. Instead, the unexpectedly righteous funnyman tore into the hosts for "hurting America" with the show's stage-managed ideological cage matches.

"[Don] Imus came to Washington and bashed you guys, and he got, like, 300 new stations," Stewart is **supposed to have said** to Begala after the cameras went dark. "So I think this will work out for me." And so it did. CNN canceled *Crossfire* months later. Media-watchers gave credit to Stewart for letting the air out of its tires. Which is real power.

"Someday we will find that watchdog," Franken had predicted. And that is exactly what Stewart's show in short order became to many, many minds: *Media Matters* with dick jokes.

It's important that the vehicle of his ascent was *Crossfire*, specifically: Franken's target (and implicit model) had been the "right-wing media machine." Stewart's liberal sympathies were always clear, and the belligerent inanity of Fox News a particular rich source of material—just as on *Crossfire*, Tucker Carlson clearly irks him in particular. But Stewart couched his act not as the left-wing O'Reilly—although that is what he de facto became—but as an anti-pundit pundit going after "partisan hackery," "political theater," and "spin" in general.

Positioning himself above the fray was a smart play and is part of what allowed him to preserve the air of ineffable cool that is key to his appeal. But it had costs in terms of his ability to play the crusading role that fans clearly wanted of him. His contradictions have been **picked over so endlessly** that they need not be rehashed here. Hell, the *Crossfire* gang was already picking at them, needling him on how tepid his own guest interviews were.

"Well, we have civilized discourse," Stewart parried. That was shortly before he called Carlson a "dick," to the delight of the crowd.

Still, it's worth detailing one aspect of the Stewart *Daily Show* that flows from his politics of cool. If you had to guess what the main targets of Stewart's crusading ridicule have been over his 16-year tenure, you'd probably say, first of all, "Fox News," and second, maybe "CNN" or just "Republicans." But "left-wing protest movements" would also be up there.

A **much-noted example** of recent vintage would be *The Daily Show's* treatment of Occupy Wall Street, cartooning it as a bunch of air-headed nuts. It took the police firing stun grenades at Occupy Oakland to **get Stewart's sympathy**, state extremism throwing the stakes into relief—though even then he still couldn't resist a dig at the protesters as "people who consider drum circles sleepy-time music." Close watchers of the show, however, might have already anticipated his distaste.

Go back to the big cause in the streets when he took the helm of *The Daily Show* in 1999, the antiglobalization movement. Stewart **hewed to** the mainstream caricature of it as a bunch of rowdy vandals. In 2002, as demonstrators converged on New York during the World Economic Forum, *The Daily Show* host **pilloried them again**, this time as "moneyed anarchists from Connecticut."

Showing a picture of a young woman in an American-flag bandanna, Stewart ventriloquizes her: "My daddy sent me here on Amtrak." The coalition of labor, Third World justice, and environmental groups that formed the backbone of that movement was invisible to his gaze.

The same was true with the movement against the Iraq War. In 2003, faced with the largest coordinated demonstrations in world history in the lead-up to the invasion, Stewart **chose** to focus on a clip of a theater troupe, women wearing strap-on-dildo missiles and singing a mortifying Doors parody, "Show me the way to the next oil well/ Oh don't ask why . . ."

"Oh, antiwar movement," Stewart intoned, following the clip, "I want so much for you to have a cogent position that acknowledges and counters the arguments for war." Not exactly fair to the many thousands of ordinary Americans who marched, trying very hard to have their "cogent positions" against the war heard, totally without a talk show.

What does this pattern tell us about Jon Stewart?

No one, I think, would claim him as a left-wing radical—that is, unless you are the kind of person who thinks the "War on Christmas" is a real thing. But I also don't think that he can even be called "progressive" either. That term would be reserved for someone with a smidge more patience for the hurly-burly of grassroots politics. Stewart's ideals place him as a creature of mainstream establishment liberalism, his comedy serving the function as both its id and superego, mocking its foes and lamenting its failures.

Popular protest grows, in general, out of a sense that people's voices aren't heard within that establishment. Massing together with other people, not all of them cool or totally articulate, is sometimes the only medium that such people have faced with a system so coagulated with big money. And this is indispensable: For all its wooliness, Occupy Wall Street made inequality a central and permanent part of the political conversation in just a few months.

When it came time for Stewart to throw his own weight behind a demonstration, however, it was in the form of his own *Daily Show*-branded "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Inspire Fear" of 2011, an exercise in "fake protest" to match his "fake news" brand. The event managed to draw more than 200,000 people to Washington, D.C., to take a bold stand for . . . no one was really sure. A **representative placard** read SOMEWHAT IRRITATED ABOUT EXTREME OUTRAGE. Cloaked as a distaste for extremes on all sides, progressive ideals cease to be able to even articulate themselves with conviction. They thus become, well, a joke.

"Stewart set out to be a working comedian, and he ended up an invaluable patriot," David Remnick intones in the current *New Yorker*. Well, he's certainly been invaluable for many things in my book, but I still think that we shouldn't downplay the dilemmas he leaves us with. "I didn't realize that the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity," Stewart said on *Crossfire* back in 2004, when Carlson attempted to turn the tables on him. It's easy to fall into that trap.

The Daily Show will no doubt go out on a high note, its ability to infuriate Fox News undimmed. Yet it is also characterized by an aura of exhaustion on the part of its host, the exhaustion of relentlessly driving his head, night after night, against the same idiocies, which have only very rarely yielded to his mockery. You can learn so much from Jon Stewart about how to make politics cool and, yes, funny. But you might draw the negative lesson, that in order to make actual and durable political progress, you probably will actually need to risk being uncool as well.