



STEPHEN COLBERT

Beyond Truthiness

Bruce Watson



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CHAPTER 1

STEPSON OF THE SOUTH

“I love the truth. It’s the facts I’m not a fan of.”

The president looked bewildered. The guests looked confused. The tuxedo-and-corsage crowd at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner in 2006 expected the president to take a little ribbing, but no one expected *this*. The comedian at the podium looked harmless enough - clean-cut, bespectacled, much like a television anchorman - but had anyone watched his show? Did anyone know what a crazed character he pretended to be? Had anyone warned George W. Bush? The president leaned back in his chair, a look of disgust on his face, and let Stephen Colbert continue.

“Wow, what an honor! The White House Correspondents’ dinner! To sit here at the same table with my hero, George W. Bush! To be this close to the man! I feel like I’m dreaming. Somebody pinch me! You know, I’m a pretty sound sleeper - that may not be enough. Somebody shoot me in the face.” The vice president, who had recently shot a hunting partner by accident, was absent, but the president was not amused. Colbert, standing just ten feet from the most powerful man in the world, adjusted his glasses and pressed on.

“My name is Stephen Colbert, and tonight it is my privilege to celebrate this president because we’re not so different, he and I. We both get it. Guys like us, we’re not some brainiacs on the Nerd Patrol. We’re not members of the Fact-inista.” Bush’s head bobbed as he chuckled, and Colbert turned to him. “We go straight from the gut, right, sir? That’s where the truth lies - right down here in the gut. Ladies and gentlemen, do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. Now I know some of you are going to tell me, ‘I looked it up, and that’s not true.’ That’s ‘cause you looked it up in a book. Next time, look it up in your gut.”

After a few jokes about believing in America - “I believe it exists; my gut tells me I live there” - Colbert turned to politics. “I believe the government that governs best is the government that governs least. And by these standards, we have set up a fabulous government in Iraq.” Getting his first big laugh, Colbert then aimed for the president’s gut. Bush squirmed.

“Most of all, I believe in this president. Now I know there’s

some polls out there saying that this man has a 32 percent approval rating. But guys like us, we don't pay attention to the polls. We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in reality. And reality has a well-known liberal bias."

Laying on the sarcasm, spreading it with vainglorious gestures and pontifical patriotism, Colbert continued for another fifteen minutes. Laughter was sporadic. White House reporters were accustomed to sarcasm, but Colbert took aim at them, too, praising them for soft-peddling issues: tax cuts, weapons of mass destruction, global warming? "We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out," Colbert proclaimed.

Many reporters sat with grim faces or downcast looks, their bewilderment suggesting they were witnessing the crash landing of a career, not its takeoff. But within days, people in Washington and all of America were talking about the comedian who had the guts - or gut - to speak truth to oblivious power. Some of the comments included: "A battle cry from a court jester" (*Seattle Post Intelligencer*); "The man is a genius" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*); and "One of the great satirical wits of our time" (*San Antonio Express News*).

Colbert's "Mocking of the President 2006" aired live only on C-SPAN and MSNBC. Deep in the cable wilderness, it may have attracted a sliver of the prime-time audience, but within days, the twenty-two-minute video became an Internet sensation. More than 2.7 million YouTube hits led C-SPAN to demand that the footage be removed. When the clip was shifted to Google Videos and a new Web site, thankyoustephencolbert.org, the hits kept coming. Released as an audio selection on iTunes, Colbert's attack instantly topped the download charts. "Stephen Colbert" became the Web's top search term. Gawker.com asked readers to vote whether the comedian had pulled off "one of the most patriotic acts I've witnessed" or was "not really that funny." Colbert was featured on *60 Minutes*, profiled in magazines and newspapers, and lauded as the man who finally made the truth "painful for President Bush, his cronies, and the media."

When he stepped before the president, Stephen Colbert was

known mostly to cynics and skeptics - a man who would have been unwelcome at the White House. Today, he is the leader of an entire nation. Colbert Nation includes not just the 2 million Comedy Central viewers who watch *The Colbert Report* every night. This singular society, part fan club and part cult, has spread the pompous ego of Colbert's character around the world and into outer space.

Colbert has testified before Congress and twice run for president. He has sung with Paul McCartney, hung his portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, and inspired a "Google bombing" campaign that made colbertnation.com the first hit for those searching the terms "greatest living American" and "giant brass balls."

Making fun of celebrity culture, Colbert has encouraged his fans to lobby for the placement of his name on just about everything, resulting in "Stephen Colbert" appearing on an airliner, a spider, a Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream flavor, a nesting peregrine falcon, and a piece of the International Space Station.

But what's most interesting about Stephen Colbert is not who he is but who he isn't. To begin with, Stephen Colbert is not STEPHEN COLBERT! Off camera, the loudmouthed self-promoter turns into a gentle, polite father of three; a staunch Catholic and Sunday-school teacher; a lover of fantasy; a serious student of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien; and a major comedic artist whose career has been as finely tuned as his jokes.

So who is this faux-conservative comedian? This man who came from South Carolina but has no trace of an accent? Who gave up his dream of being a dramatic actor to struggle through the ranks of sketch comedy? Who, as a correspondent for Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, deftly parodied the maudlin sincerity of news correspondents? Who, on the first episode of his own show, coined the word truthiness, the zeitgeist term of our times? Who simultaneously embodies and satirizes America's pompous celebrity culture? Who IS THIS COMEDIAN WHO takes nothing, not even the awesomeness of presidential power, seriously? And why doesn't he pronounce the "t" in his last name?