Did you groan when Jay Leno and David Letterman told Monica jokes? Do you TiVo The Daily Show and The Colbert Report? If your answer is yes, then Strange Bedfellows: How Late Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke may be the book for you. According to political-cartoonist-turned-academic, Russell L. Peterson, late-night television comedy has a profound and, as the title suggests, largely negative impact on American politics.

Strange Bedfellows presents two categories of late-night political humor. First, the long line of network hosts: from Steve Allen, Jack Paar and, of course, Johnny Carson, to Letterman, Leno and Conan O'Brien. All American and plain vanilla, they have delivered anti-political, dumbed-down comedy for fifty years. Peterson prefers satire, and the more biting the better. With the advent of cable "narrowcasting" to smaller niche audiences, The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Colbert Report and Real Time with Bill Maher bring something fresh and exciting to late-night political comedy.

Peterson gushes over the cable guys. Although Maher's pontificating can be painful, the comedian speaks truth to power. Stewart is lionized as well, although we note for the record that the book fails to quote The Daily Show's greatest line "Joe Lieberman: the candidate for people who wanna vote for Bush but don't think he's Jewish enough." And Peterson reaches a hot, wet, climax with Colbert, whose in-character put-down performance at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2006, with President Bush sitting a few feet away, was "miraculous". Colbert's show, according to Peterson, is a "profoundly moral undertaking" and Stephen Colbert himself is - yes - "Lincolnish."

The substantive argument of Strange Bedfellows is that traditional late-night comedy is dangerous because it "insists that since politics is inherently impure, elections, deliberation and democracy itself are all futile." By contrast, "genuine, politically engaged satire, motivated by a passionate belief in democracy, equality [and] justice...can play a vital role in telling the people what is going on and why they should care." Notably eschewing Saturday Night Live, Peterson concludes "at their best, Colbert, Stewart, Maher and a few others provide this vital service."

Problems with the book abound. The premise that late-night comedy endangers democracy is, well, preposterous. Peterson could just as well argue that late-night, as a whole, has enriched America's political culture. And, at times, he contradicts himself by doing just that. Nor does he provide evidence that late-night television alters people's opinions about politics. Peterson's liberal biases, moreover, undermine his major arguments. He disdains comedians who are "equal opportunity offenders," and then blasts Dennis Miller for giving George W. Bush a permanent "pass." And he forbids anyone "without a clearly defined, progressive agenda," from opening up Pandora's Box by submitting the subject of "political correctness" to comic exploration.

The book's many, many asides are very, very annoying. Citing a study done at East Carolina University, Peterson mocks, "East Carolina?" Then there is a bizarre comparison of the absence of Jews in network late-night to the injustices of the Negro Leagues. At its worst Strange Bedfellows seems like the ruminations of a political scientist who has just smoked his first joint: "The real Lincoln was less a backwoods naif than a shrewd politician." Or: "Politics is not a holy quest, it's a dialectic process, in which thesis and antithesis must continually end in the imperfect but necessary synthesis of compromise." Does anyone have a roach clip?

Nonetheless, Peterson deserves credit for raising important questions about the relationship between entertainment, mass media, and politics. Bearing in mind - as he does not - the potential for all this analysis to go way over the top, it is worth following up on polls that reveal that 61% of Americans under thirty get some - or most - of their information about politics from late-night comedy shows. Has our politics changed because of late-night and - importantly - its recent incarnations on cable?

We think the answer is a qualified "no." But there are legitimate concerns. As Cass Sunstein has pointed out in Republic.com, narrowcasting makes it easier to live in homogeneous spaces where preconceptions are never challenged. You fulminate with Fox, and rush to Rush - or count on Countdown and Colbert. And you never encounter mass media outlets where they aren't talking your kind of talk. And it is true for late-night: at the end of the day, so to speak, people may well show up for reinforcement of their beliefs.

Second, we should think a little bit about late-night television - and politics - as part of the phenomenon of "celebrification of culture." Many of us now vote for the person we like the most - and don't spend much time understanding the issues. Since Bill Clinton played sax on Arsenio Hall, it's become a must for
presidential candidates to hit *The Daily Show* and Letterman and Leno, answer questions about their underwear, and score points - "persona points" - with their audiences.

And, there's a third topic: thanks in part to mass media, many of us have bought the Republican argument that government is "The Problem." Remember the feature on ABC News, "It's Your Money"? When did it highlight tax-dollars that were well spent? Late-night comedians, too, love to talk about bridges to nowhere, Big Digs, and the "hell-of-a-good-job" Brownie was doing in New Orleans. After all, competence isn't very funny.

Where is all of this going?

Late-night has been, by and large, a phenomenally successful business and it will be around as long as is there is television. The current change agent is cable - and cable shows which have expanded the art form of the the late-night show. The internet will have a further fragmenting impact on television news and politically-oriented comedy. It will also accelerate "the big sort," creating more niches for increasingly partisan, political humor. Just as Johnny Carson could not have envisioned *The Colbert Report*, the next constellation of late-night stars will include someone or something from the internet which we just don't expect.

Is there really anything to worry about? Russell Peterson believes that "every joke is a referendum on its premise." He argues that we laugh at a Bush-is-dumb or a Gore-is-a-serial-exaggerator joke because we believe Bush is dumb or Gore is a serial exaggerator. Maybe so. And maybe, as only a political scientist would say, comedy is eroding comity - by dividing us into enemy camps, with our own hermetically-sealed sources of information, and strengthening our skepticism about government.

But the comedians who are the subjects of this book - the networkers and the narrowcasters - often say, "We're just doing jokes." Many of their fans agree. They want to watch, laugh, and fall asleep. Jokes, after all, are jokes. We're not inclined to impose weighty obligations on our Johnny-Come-Late-Nightlies. Better to direct our collective attention where it really belongs: at self-serving politicians, special interests, ideological attack groups and an ill-informed, apathetic electorate.

**Reviewers' note:** Mr. Morris's law firm represents a number of individuals discussed in *Strange Bedfellows*. Some of the individuals are treated favorably in the book, some unfavorably.

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