

VANITY FAIR

POLITICS

That's Political Entertainment!

The old punditocracy, grounded in facts, credentials, and rational debate, has been overpowered by a new breed of political entertainer, who deals in raw emotion. Sure, there's some brainy blue-state satire out there, from Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. But the likes of Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, Kelsey Grammer, et al. aren't trying to change the way people think, the author argues—they don't want their audiences to think at all.

BY JAMES WOLCOTT • PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DARROW

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NOTE FROM INSTRUCTOR: This essay exemplifies the kind of witty, sophisticated prose expected of a writer who succeeds in reaching an educated readership. Analyze Wolcott's prose style to learn the writing strategy and tactics that make this piece successful.

EMOTE CONTROL

Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, Sarah Palin, and Glenn Beck.

In *Morning Glory*, last year's most underrated movie comedy, go-getter breakfast-show producer Becky Fuller (Rachel McAdams, divine), in a burst of exasperation, explains the facts of life to journalistic warhorse Mike Pomeroy (Harrison Ford, face furrowed with mental indigestion): "The world has been debating news versus entertainment for years, and guess what? You lost!" Which hasn't stopped the losing side from singing the chain-gang blues. Civic-minded souls in journalism, academe, and the mushroom farms of C-span panels can still be heard lamenting the infestation of news and politics by showbiz values, a war between informed debate and pole dancing that they (unlike Ford's Pomeroy) recognize as a lost cause, hence their elegiac tone, the dead fly in their lemonade. The days when the words "Hollywood actor" framed Ronald Reagan like

bunny fingers as an ID tag and an implied insult seem far-off and quaint: nearly everybody in politics—candidate, consultant, pundit, and Tea Party crowd extra alike—is an actor now, a shameless ham in a hoked-up reality series that never stops. (Only Mitt Romney doesn't seem to have gotten the memo, his polished-leather insincerity unsalted with irony or anything remotely self-aware.) Mourning the fall of the judicious savant (or solon) and the rise of the preening jester is pointless, foolish; elite opinion has failed this country so miserably that it has no moral or intellectual standing left, only its club-member privileges. Think back on the Iraq war and the W.M.D.'s, the Terri Schiavo circus, the iguana contortions of John McCain under the guise of maverick integrity, the Wall Street meltdown and bailout—TV satirists and late-night hosts drove much deeper nails into the marrow of what was happening than the editorial pages of *The Washington Post*, that prison morgue of Beltway consensus. A new political-entertainment class has moved into the noisy void once occupied by the sage pontiffs of yore, a class just as polarized as our partisan divide: one side holding up a fun-house mirror to folly, the other side reveling in its own warped reflection.

The rival sides massed their forces on the Washington Mall before the midterm elections, summoning ignorant armies that didn't so much clash by night as give each other askance looks across distant afternoons. On August 28, 2010, Fox News messiah Glenn Beck hosted a "Restoring Honor" revival meeting featuring sexy guest star Sarah Palin, much as Bob Hope would roll out Raquel Welch in white go-go boots on his U.S.O. tours to give our fighting men a morale lift in their khakis. Even in a clown era, Beck is an unlikely crusade leader. Round and beige, he resembles one of the squeamish pod sperm awaiting launch instructions upstream in Woody Allen's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*. Like radio god Rush Limbaugh, Beck combines the roles of pedagogue and demagogue into a single luncheon meat, slathered in blather. But where Limbaugh stays on track in the radio studio, taking a single theme and pounding it flat, Beck is a grab-bag collage artist of half-baked ideas and lore, grafting bits of history and chunks of speculation into a clanking Frankenstein monster with Barack Obama's face sewn onto Karl Marx's head and one arm raised in permanent Nazi salute—"liberal Fascism" as an evil action figure. Easily excitable, Beck expresses himself on a glandular level, maudlin tears springing from his squeezable head as he finds himself overcome by the dark prospects his prophecies reveal. But his big-top showmanship, like Limbaugh's, is unquestioned, and he was able to draw an estimated 87,000-plus star-spangled fans to the Mall, despite their trepidation at being in a city so abundant with black people.

Two months later, Beck's inspirational call was answered by Comedy Central's Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," a political-

vaudeville gala featuring music by the Roots and John Legend, Colbert prancing around in an Evel Knievel jumpsuit, and capped with a secular sermon by Stewart that castigated the media for the melodramatic polarization of our politics—“the country’s 24-hour politico pundit perpetual panic conflictinator” was what he called this spew machine. So earnest, incisive, and eloquent was Stewart’s peroration (reminiscent of the end scene in *Scrooged*, when Bill Murray’s cynic gets sincere) that one liberal blogger saluted him as “our first Jewish president,” mensch in chief. Others were less wowed. Bill Maher, the more libertarian lone-wolf host of his own HBO series and another high-ranking member of the political-entertainment caste, considered the Stewart-Colbert rally a Kabuki show of empty calories: “If you’re going to have a rally, you might as well make it about something.” Janet Malcolm, covering the event for *The New York Review of Books* (how odd—*New York Review* correspondents so seldom venture outdoors), found Stewart’s sentiments commendable but his rhetoric mushy and the entire event too aglow in its own huggable goodness. “We were at a giant preen-in,” she wrote.

Despite such criticisms, optimists took heart that the Stewart-Colbert rally attracted twice as many congregants as Beck’s (more than 200,000 was the estimate), which seemed like a victory for tolerance, rationality, and comedy over flag-waving, flabby-jowled demon-hunting. A few days later, however, came the midterm elections, and optimists could be heard hyperventilating into paper bags, overcome with panic attacks over the Republican gains. It was Beck’s militia that had the momentum and lit up the scoreboard, the cool blue of sanity no match for the red-hot farrago of doomsday rhetoric. A blogger named David Seaton provided the keenest insight into the tactical superiority of Beck’s home-brewed surrealism. “To understand what Beck is doing, to *understand* him, you must suspend your capacity for rational thought and just let the emotions wash over you and try to take note of them as they assault your endocrine system,” Seaton wrote. As America enters the downward slope of empire—its debt mounting, the disparity between wealthy and poor continuing to chasm, the environmental ravages becoming irreversible, high unemployment becoming the cruel norm—the Richie Riches have a vested interest in misdirecting people by blaming the powerless for the sins of the powerful. Incoherence isn’t a bug in Beck’s software program, it’s the primary directive. Seaton: “That is what the Tea Party, Fox, etc is all about: keeping people from thinking straight. The idea is to play on people’s emotions: fear, hate, racism, xenophobia, just to keep them from doing the math. The Teabaggers, Beck, [Gingrich] and Fox [News] are often criticized for not making any sense This is not a failure of communication or an error on their part That is the object of the exercise: *to make rational thought difficult or impossible due to emotional overload.*” (My italics.)

The gap between those who grasp this and those clinging to the floating driftwood was dramatized in a *Rolling Stone* panel discussion in which renegade journalist Matt Taibbi flat out called the Tea Partiers “crazy,” much to the tea-pinkie dismay of David Gergen and pollster Peter Hart. You simply can’t write off such a large slice of the electorate as mental patients, Gergen demurred. (Gergen’s the Perry Como of demurrals.) Sure you can, Taibbi replied. “I interview these people. They’re not basing their positions on the facts—they’re completely uninterested in the facts. They’re voting completely on what they see and hear on Fox News and afternoon talk radio, and that’s enough for them.” This disinformation addiction puts the political satirists on the left at a disadvantage—how do you poke fun at nonsense that’s *intended* to be nonsensical, an ideological crack pipe blowing smoke into millions of brains? Swiftian satire clicks only for those already *compos mentis*.

Glenn Beck isn’t the only flea-circus ringmaster on the right. There’s Kelsey Grammer, whose sitcom persona as Frasier Crane has glazed him with the aura of a patrician patron of opera, fine wine, and posh elocution, the modern-day equivalent of a pretentious fop out of Congreve or Molière. With his super-freaky marital and extramarital escapades, and his willingness to do drag on Broadway in *La Cage aux Folles*, he would appear to have all the fixings of a liberal wacko—one of us, as it were. (He’s so much more charming than Jon Voight, who shows up at Tea Party rallies and rattles on like a derelict.) But Grammer is also the front man for a mega-Web site/fledgling cable channel called RightNetwork, which pledges allegiance to Norman Rockwell values of Americana but has under its glossy veneer another bughouse operation. Its pundit-in-residence is Jim Hoft, who once carried a coffin to the home of Democratic congressman Russ Carnahan, and one of its frequent contributors is a ranter named Robin of Berkeley, who presents herself as psychotherapist and political leper trapped behind the enemy lines of liberalism, where conservatives have to blink at each other in Morse code for fear of being overheard and tongue-lashed by radical lesbians, and not in a good way. Like so many pseudo-populist operations, RightNetwork is funded by a wealthy benefactor with an agenda, Comcast-Spectacor chairman Ed Snider, whose media outfit also owns the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team. It was Snider who invited Sarah Palin to drop the hockey puck at the Flyers’ season opener in 2008, and Palin’s been dropping pucks ever since.

Like soul brother Beck, Sarah Palin has moonshot herself into a zero-gravity zone that is beyond parody, where brazen self-caricature takes on the bold outlines of cartoon stardom and nothing she does perturbs her fan base. They have adopted her as their mommy savior and the ridicule and criticism she receives only endear her more to the faithful, proof of how much she gets under liberals’ prickly skin. With each new

iteration of herself (tweeter, best-selling author, Fox News political analyst, Facebook avenger), Palin becomes more of an infotainment fembot, an irresistible force impervious to the political rules that hamstring lesser phonies. Had Al Gore or John Kerry made the gaffe Palin made over the Korean conflict (“Obviously, we have got to stand with our North Korean allies”), it would have been pin-the-tail-on-their-donkey-butts for weeks, whereas for Palin it’s just another dot in the pointillism of her ongoing cavalcade. Palin’s worst enemies have never been David Letterman, the “lamestream media,” or Katie Couric but her own insatiability for attention, a narcissism with no Off button or volume knob. With her reality series on TLC, *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, “Snowflake Snooki” (as she is known on some liberal sites) may have extended her brand a bridge too far. The huge ratings of her debut program plummeted 40 percent for the second, and, tellingly, conservative publications normally in her camp ridiculed her gooey, ungovernable ego. In *The Weekly Standard* (whose editor, William Kristol, was one of the original talent scouts who discovered Palin), Matt Labash wrote, “It’s hard to tell sometimes where Sarah ends and Alaska begins. The Last Frontier of Alaska is as wild and untamed as Sarah Palin’s ambitions. So it makes sense that Sarah loves Alaska, because loving Alaska is like loving herself. And that’s what *Sarah Palin’s Alaska* is really about: self-love.” One pitfall with becoming a reality-TV star is that reality doesn’t always stick to the script, as Palin’s co-star on one episode, Kate Gosselin of TLC’s ill-fated *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, can attest. Gosselin was undone by her husband’s infidelity. Palin, a control freak in the very BB-gun pellets of her eyes, politically can’t afford to have her entire family go Kardashian. America can accept one teenage daughter of a family-values candidate getting pregnant out of wedlock, but two looks careless, as Oscar Wilde might say. If Willow becomes round yon virgin with child, kiss 2012 buh-bye.

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