

**STEPHEN COLBERT'S SUPER PAC
AND THE GROWING ROLE OF COMEDY IN OUR
POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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Abstract:

Comedy plays an increasingly legitimate role in the American political discourse as figures such as Stephen Colbert effectively use humor and satire to scrutinize politics and current events, and encourage the public to think more critically about how our government and leaders rule. In his response to the Supreme Court case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) and the rise of Super PACs, Stephen Colbert has taken the lead in critiquing changes in campaign finance. This study analyzes segments from *The Colbert Report* and the Colbert Super PAC, identifying his message and tactics. This paper aims to demonstrate how Colbert pushes political satire to new heights by engaging in real life campaigns, thereby offering a legitimate voice in today’s political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

While political satire is not new, few have mastered this art like Stephen Colbert, whose originality and influence have catapulted him to the status of a pop culture icon. Never breaking character from his zany, blustering persona, Colbert has transformed the way Americans view politics by using comedy to draw attention to important issues of the day, critiquing and unpacking these issues in a digestible way for a wide audience. Colbert’s undeniable popularity has launched not only his very own Ben and Jerry’s ice cream flavor – Americone Dream, and a NASA treadmill named after him on the International Space Station, but more importantly, Colbert has become a leading figure in scrutinizing current affairs, the actions of our leaders, and the mainstream news media. Colbert’s satire is transforming the political discourse by using comedy not only on his show but in engaging with the real world to “tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world.”¹

¹ Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 8.

This paper aims to demonstrate how Colbert is expanding the genre of political satire in our political discourse, particularly through his Super PAC, an entity engaging in real elections as a way to satirically expose the flaws in America's campaign finance.

Before discussing the influence of Colbert's political satire, it is important to first examine the history of this genre and establish a framework for defining political satire.

WHAT IS POLITICAL SATIRE?

According to Ian Johnston, a retired literature professor at Vancouver Island University, satire can "come in many forms, from savage to gentle, but it remains satire so long as we feel that the writer's main purpose is making us laugh at conduct which he believes *ought to be corrected*" (emphasis added).² Striking an emotional and moral nerve is an inherent element of this genre. Unlike other forms of critique, "satire transforms the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous".³ It is because of this intrinsically theatrical, if not silly, quality that satire creates room to dole out a more severe critique and has more leeway to engage in topics that other mediums might not be as well-equipped to examine.

More specifically, political satire can be defined as a genre that employs wit, sarcasm, or humor to ridicule the vices, foibles, and incompetence of individuals or institutions, highlighting the absurdity – if not wrongdoing – in the actions of authorities.⁴ The goal of political satire is to "expose foolishness in all its guises [...] and to *effect reform* through such exposure" (emphasis

² Ian Johnston "On Satire in Aristophanes's *The Clouds*," *Vancouver Island University*, Nov 1998, 5 May 2012 <<http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/introser/clouds.htm>>.

³ Gray, Jones and Thompson.

⁴ Robert Speel "Probing Question: How old is political satire?," *Research Penn State*, 2008, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.rps.psu.edu/probing/satire.html>>.

added).⁵ At the same time, political satire is not simply propaganda either. Rachel Sotos says of political satire, “It’s really, lastingly funny because it engages free thought and imagination. [...] Satire is best understood as a playful way of addressing reality, one which necessarily assumes that there’s more than one plausible way to interpret things.”⁶ It should be noted that political satire does not need to be entirely truthful; it is not the same as fabrication, which could be mistaken for truth (with the ultimate goal being deception), but it clearly employs creativity to paint a picture for the audience. Satire relies on a license to take what audiences recognize and stretch it to an extreme, using exaggeration to illustrate the nuances of a critique.

In short, political satire is a form that inherently puts demands on the audience to see more clearly both what is and what should be – to reevaluate the way things work in the world. It ultimately aims to:

- Expose faults of a specific person, action, or institution through humor, irony, or ridicule
- Elicit an emotional reaction and moral judgment from the audience
- Effect political change, meaning some change to political institutions, political actors, and/or matters of broad social concern

HOW SATIRE EVOLVED, A BRIEF HISTORY

Traditional satire took the form of literature and theater, a realm where the audience enters the mind of the author or playwright. Aristophanes can be considered one of the first satirists and is often called “The Father of Comedy” as his works are the only full extant samples

⁵ “Who’s Laughing Now? American Political Satire,” *NOW with David Brancaccio*, 11 July 2003, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/satire.html>>.

⁶ Rachel Sotos, “The Fake News as The Fifth Estate,” ed. Jason Holt, *The Daily Show and Philosophy: Moments of Zen in the Art of Fake News* (MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 31.

of the Greek Old Comedy; he mixed social, political, and literary satire in one, a common trait of early satire.⁷ In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes ridicules Socrates and his Thinkery, essentially critiquing education and the struggle to reconcile science with religion. Aristophanes' satire is valued to this day for its philosophical underpinnings, particularly as its arguments are compared against Plato's *Apology*, his version of the speech Socrates gave in his defense for how he teaches "the truth". As Johnston says:

*"The Clouds is justly famous as a very robust satire featuring a wide variety of satiric techniques, some very corny, some rude, some very physical, some sophisticated parody (in language), some pointed personal references to members of the audience, a direct address to the audience, some lyrical interludes, lots of dancing and singing and music, and a wealth of technical detail in the stage design and costumes, and so on, a whole arsenal of techniques designed above all else to keep the attack varied and funny (with no concessions to political correctness)."*⁸

This classical play compels audiences to recognize Socrates' shortcomings, even if some of them are silly and inaccurate, as Aristophanes paints a picture of what ridiculous outcomes could result if everyone followed Socrates' philosophy. Similarly, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* tells the comical story of how women tried to end the Peloponnesian Wars by boycotting sex as a way of forcing their husbands and lovers to negotiate peace; the work is essentially a satire about the male-dominated society and can be classified as political satire: Aristophanes used humor to raise questions about the ongoing war.

With Greek Old Comedy, satire played out in the world of theater, a forum where the audience explores an internal philosophical debate, not yet engaging in reality. That is not to say, however, that Aristophanes' work did not endure; indeed, his originality made his works timeless, and in 2003, *Lysistrata* was used in a theatrical demonstration where people around the

⁷ "Aristophanes," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th Edition (2011): 1. Academic Search Premier. Web. 26 Apr. 2012.

⁸ Johnston 1.

world publicly read the play in order to protest the impending War in Iraq.⁹ Again, unlike propaganda, which primarily serves to manipulate public opinion by presenting facts selectively while claiming to be wholly true, political satire is a more creative and appealing way to frame criticism, clearly representing a certain perspective rather than a giving a directive to the public. The ultimate goal of political satire is not to deceive but to shed light.

Fast forward to the 18th century, and political satire had developed to become a populist tool or a vehicle for communicating more complex messages and critiques about current issues. For example, in 1729, Jonathan Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal*, satirically advocating that people eat human babies as a source of food to combat the famine in Ireland.¹⁰ At a time when political pamphleteering was commonplace, Swift parodied the clinical style of these tracts and their solutions for all of Ireland's social and economic ills. Unlike a play or novel which can exist in its own fictional realm, Swift's essay illustrates another characteristic of political satire: engaging in mimicry of how real-life information is distributed in order to expose some larger truth. In sharp contrast to the dark subject matter of his pamphlet, Swift used deadpan irony, going so far as to describe the logistics and pricing of a baby eating enterprise, proclaiming the benefits of regulating the population size and enhancing the culinary experience of the wealthy – all while ending the nation's poverty. Naturally (and as Swift intended), people found his suggestion of cannibalism and infanticide disgusting and gruesome; some readers even misunderstood his satire and believed he was truly serious, causing such a strong backlash that Swift nearly lost his patronage.¹¹ Nonetheless, *A Modest Proposal* is remembered today as a

⁹ "Lysistrata Project Archive," 10 Mar 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://lysistrataprojectarchive.com/>>.

¹⁰ Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* 1729.

¹¹ E. F. Watley "Perspective: Jonathan Swift's Modest Proposal." *Check Please! The serious side of satire*, 24 Oct 2005, 5 May 2012 <<http://checkplease.humorfeed.com/issues/0201/20051024swift.php>>.

prime example of political satire for being able to evoke the strong reactions that Swift hoped the Irish would have about allowing their fellow countrymen to live in abject poverty.

Like Swift, Benjamin Franklin also mocked the style of political essays, but he also made his messages less subtle and more accessible to the masses. In Franklin's day, the majority of people were semi-literate at best, so Franklin sought to convey various perspectives about society in layman's terms.¹² For instance, in the 1720s, he published numerous letters pseudonymously, satirically addressing social ills through the voices of fictional characters he created, including "Silence Dogood", a widow and harsh critic of society; "Polly Baker", a prostitute who had a child out of wedlock and protested the sexual double standard; and "Poor Richard Saunders", a farmer who shared folksy wisdom.¹³ Rather than publish a technical jargon-heavy critique, Franklin used a colloquial satire to discuss issues such as whether or not parents should send their children to schools of higher learning; in the voice of Silence Dogood:

*"I reflected in my Mind on the extream Folly of those Parents, who, blind to their Childrens Dulness, and insensible of the Solidity of their Skulls, because they think their Purses can afford it, will needs send them to the Temple of Learning, where, for want of a suitable Genius, they learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a Room genteely, (which might as well be acquir'd at a Dancing-School,) and from whence they return, after Abundance of Trouble and Charge, as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited."*¹⁴

While this is more of a social critique, it is still evident that Franklin's satire was more accessible to the everyman than Swift's; he used satire as the vehicle for his message, trusting his readers were sophisticated enough to recognize his ruse and find his ideas between the lines.¹⁵

¹² "Franklin Funnies," PBS 2002, 5 May 2012 <http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3_wit_franklin.html>.

¹³ Sotos 32.

¹⁴ Benjamin Franklin, *The New-England Courant* 7-14 May 1722.

¹⁵ Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006) 91.

By the 18th century, satire had become a voice of the people, easily striking a chord with everyday folks on an emotional level and making complex critiques both easier to recognize and remember; in this way, political satire naturally lent itself well to rallying people or gaining traction for a movement. As tensions rose during the time of the American Revolution, satirists depicted King George III and his Loyalists as buffoons.¹⁶ Likewise, “broadside proclaiming martial law or demanding the arrest of rebels were frequently answered by anonymous verse parodies [...] ridiculing not only the colonial official who issued the proclamation but the language of political authority itself”; again, satirists mimicked the writing style of traditional political essays to portray the British government as ridiculous and oppressive. In 1773, Franklin published a satirical essay titled “Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One,” which crudely compared the British Empire to a large cake. With an easy-to-follow analogy, irony, and reverse logic, Franklin illustrated the colonists’ grievances in twenty easy-to-understand points, again overcoming literacy barriers.¹⁷ For example, he “gives advice” on how the empire can strip colonies of their last solace, their fundamental rights:

“To annihilate this comfort, begin by laws to perplex their commerce with infinite regulations, impossible to be remembered and observed. Ordain seizures of their property for every failure. Take away the trial of such property by jury, and give it to arbitrary Judges of your own appointing and of the lowest characters in the country, whose salaries and emoluments are to arise out of the duties or condemnations [of property], and whose appointments are during pleasure.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Collin Wells, “Satire,” *The Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2006) 159.

¹⁷ “Crisis 1763-1775,” *National Humanities Center*, Primary Sources in U.S. History & Literature, Mar 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/makingrev/crisis/text9/text9read.htm>>.

¹⁸ Benjamin Franklin, “Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One,” *The Public Adviser* 11 Sept 1773.

Although at first this essay antagonized the few British citizens who still supported the American colonies, three years later, many of Franklin's points were incorporated into the Declaration of Independence.¹⁹

Satire blossomed even more during the Gilded Age, from about 1860 to 1896, when political satire could be seen not only in literature but also in cartoons. Thomas Nast, often considered the "Father of the American Cartoon," is famous for creating many of America's best-known images, from Santa Claus and Uncle Sam, to the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant.²⁰ Nast's illustrations critiquing Boss Tweed became instrumental in the downfall of the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine. His satirical cartoons depicted Tweed as greedy, corrupt, and dangerous; for example, Nast depicted a small policeman answering to a gigantic Boss Tweed, thus portraying Tammany Hall as more powerful than the justice system, in that they have the government and tools of law enforcement in their pockets (see examples of below). Where Franklin wrote more colloquially to attract a wider audience, Nast managed to convey his criticism to the less educated immigrant population, overcoming the hurdle of English literacy entirely by creating powerful images to carry his message, which were both memorable and more universally easy to interpret. So powerful were Nast's cartoons that Tweed even tried to bribe Nast with a generous "invitation" to study art in Europe and get paid \$100,000 – in other words, Tweed tried (and failed) to ship Nast's damning satire away from his constituents;²¹ the corrupt boss of Tammany Hall also reportedly said of Nast's drawings, "Stop them damned

¹⁹ David A. Todd, "Benjamin Franklin Summarizes the Colonial Complaints," 23 July 2009, 5 May 2012 <<http://davidatodd.suite101.com/ben-franklin-summarizes-the-colonial-complaints-a133947#ixzz1svc6xtbC>>.

²⁰ "The Historic Elephant and Donkey," *The New York Times*, 2 Aug 1908, 5 May 2012 <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9D07EFDB113EE033A25751C0A96E9C946997D6CF&oref=slogin>.

²¹ Paine Albert Bigelow, *Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1904) 140.

pictures. I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents don't know how to read, but they can't help seeing them damned pictures.”²²



Thomas Nast cartoon of Boss Tweed: "Can the law reach him?"²³

By the early 20th century, satirists such as Samuel Clemens – better known as Mark Twain – and H. L. Mencken contributed their entertaining criticism to the many Progressive Era voices calling for social activism and government reform. Mark Twain’s social satire can be seen in the tales of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, as he addressed issues such as racial discrimination, superstitions, and religion with enchanting finesse, making his novels all-American classics. However, his most memorable political satire can be seen in *King Leopold’s Soliloquy* (1905), where Twain writes in the voice of the Belgian king defending his terrible rule over Congo Free State. At that time, reports surfaced that King Leopold II was grossly

²² Speel 1.

²³ Photo, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.picturehistory.com/product/id/29356>>.

exploiting and abusing Congo, starving the nation through taxation, using the population as slaves, and administering cruel punishments like chopping off their hands.²⁴

The international community, disgusted by Leopold's crimes, loudly protested, and Twain contributed his fulminating satire to what is now widely considered the first broad-based human rights movement.²⁵ In *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, the king argues that the accusations against him are virtually blasphemy because he is ordained by God, and he complains that nothing he does pleases anyone, even though he tried to convert the Africans to Christianity (as if that justified the famine he induced): "These meddlesome American missionaries! these frank British consuls! these blabbing blabbing Belgian-born traitor officials! -- those tiresome parrots are always talking, always telling."²⁶ For such works, Twain is remembered as one of America's greatest humorists, though his humor often had a larger purpose--attracting attention to very relevant issues of the day and advancing a cause he believed in.

Similarly, in 1925, H. L. Mencken wrote a satirical account of *Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, better known as the Scopes Monkey trial; this landmark case involved the religious controversy in teaching evolution in public school. An acerbic critic of Christian fundamentalism, Mencken wrote of William Jennings Bryan who was a prosecutor in the case:

"He leads a new crusade, his bald head glistening... One somehow pities him, despite his so palpable imbecilities... But let no one, laughing at him, underestimate the magic that lies in his black, malignant eye, his frayed but still eloquent voice. He can shake and inflame these poor ignoramuses as no other man among us..."

²⁴ Mark Dummett, "King Leopold's legacy of DR Congo Violence," *BBC News*, 24 Feb 2004, 5 May 2012 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3516965.stm>>.

²⁵ "Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death," *African Film*, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.africanfilm.com/Congo.htm>>.

²⁶ Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (New York: International Publishers, 1970). 31, 32.

Mencken was a journalist for *The Baltimore Sun*, which paid him to write this account of the trial because the newspaper was paying for some of Scopes' legal fees; ethical issues aside, it is a good example of political satire playing a role in the mainstream narrative by addressing current and controversial issues.²⁷

With the advent of the moving picture and then television came a whole new take on satire, which could incorporate more physical comedy and even mimic the subject. For example, in 1940, while the United States still officially declared itself isolated from World War II, comedian Charlie Chaplin wrote, produced, and directed "The Great Dictator", a movie in which he played the lead role as "Hynkel" – who resembled Adolf Hitler, using satire to condemn the Nazis, fascism, and anti-Semitism.²⁸ One of the most memorable scenes is of Hitler performing a ballet with an inflatable globe – a satirical display of Hitler's desire to rule the world. "The Great Dictator" was well-received by audiences and became Chaplin's highest grossing film.²⁹

Soon enough, political satire took new forms as a well-established avenue for both criticism as well as entertainment. By the 1970s, comedian Chevy Chase was mimicking the accents and idiosyncrasies of President Gerald Ford on *Saturday Night Live*; without using any costumes or makeup intended to make him resemble the President, Chase had audiences laughing at his impression of a clumsy and dimwitted Ford.³⁰ Ironically, Ford was a star football player in his youth, winning two national championships and the title of Most Valuable Player during his time at the University of Michigan.³¹ Chase's silly display made Ford seem ridiculous

²⁷ Noah Adams, "Timeline: Remembering the Scopes Monkey Trial," *National Public Radio*, 5 July 2005, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4723956>>.

²⁸ "The Great Dictator," 5 May 2012 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032553/>>.

²⁹ "The Great Dictator: Trivia," 5 May 2012 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032553/trivia>>.

³⁰ *Saturday Night Live*, NBC, Season 1 episode 4.

³¹ "Gerald Ford, Michigan Man," *Michigan Athletic Association*, 27 Dec 2006, 5 May 2012 <<http://mvictors.com/?p=179>>.

(if not outright dumb); and although this superficial form of political satire lacked any specific critique about Ford's policies, it still established the image of Ford as a clumsy person.

Such performances – void of any in-depth critiques – became another expression of political satire; that is, criticism could be simple and light so long as audiences were pulled in, generally for a laugh. At the same time, even political satire that lacks any exacting critique could be powerful in its ability to affect the public's perception; here, if audiences began to believe Ford was as maladroit as Chase depicted him, might they also consider Ford unfit to govern? Regardless of how accurate the satire, such mimicry could have significant repercussions.

Likewise, in 2008 on *Saturday Night Live*, comedian Tina Fey made a guest appearance, which became a recurring role, doing an impression of Sarah Palin, who was running for Vice President of the GOP at the time. The act was so convincing that many Americans even confused her with the real candidate; in fact, her uncanny portrayal earned her an Emmy Award.³² This came to a head when major news sources began picking apart Sarah Palin's interview with Katie Couric on *CBS*, claiming that she said, "I can see Russia from my house", a line that actually came from Tina Fey's skit.³³

³² Dean Goodman, "Tina Fey Wins Emmy award for Sarah Palin spoof," *Reuters*, 13 Sept 2009, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/13/us-emmys-idUSTRE58C09Y20090913>>.

³³ Matt Lewis, "When Hearsay Crowds the Truth," *Politico*, 28 Jun 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0611/57935.html>>.



Comedian Tina Fey (*left*) dressed as Sarah Palin; (*right*) the real Sarah Palin.³⁴

Fey's skit is best remembered as a remarkable crossover of political satire slipping into the real world as many Americans began mistaking the comedian for the real-life GOP candidate, associating Fey's memorable line with Palin as if she truly uttered those words. This case represents a new development in political satire: even a silly impression can be powerful enough to blur the lines of reality and have a lasting effect on how the public views real life.

Indeed, the rise in funny political satire meant that some (though not all) satire could carry less of an intelligent critique and more of an entertainment focus; that said though, being funny does not necessarily undermine the legitimacy of the criticism. In fact, humor is often essential to satire as a way to draw in viewers, and as they laugh, they inevitably see the merits in the perspective offered. No matter what or how political satire ridicules, it always has this element of appeal – whether funny or just ironic, providing audiences with a memorable interpretation of the subject. The distinction should be clear: while all political satire shows the shortcomings of a public figure or institution, not all satire delves deeply into these heavy issues;

³⁴ Photo, 5 May 2012 <<http://celebritynews.typepad.com/my-blog/2010/02/tina-fey-as-sarah-palin-once-again.html>>.

the criticism could be superficial, like making fun of President Ford's mannerisms, or it could actually scrutinize the actions and policies of the status quo. Either way, political satire can have a powerful effect.

Another emerging facet to this genre can be seen in the self-proclaimed fake newspaper, *The Onion*, where the manner in which the story is packaged and delivered *is* the joke; that is, once again, political satire can make fun of the institution of media by mimicking it. Just as Jonathan Swift imitated the writing style of political pamphlets, *The Onion* newspaper serves its satire in the format of real newspapers. Likewise, "The Onion News Network", or "ONN", hires professional news anchors rather than actors playing news anchors to discuss their fake news stories, making the show *feel* like a legitimate news program while the actual content is completely phony.³⁵ It should be noted, while many of *The Onion*'s stories qualify as political satire, the publication covers all manner of issues, even "reporting" on bogus events like an annual ninja parade that went unnoticed.³⁶

The reason *The Onion* can be included as an example of political satire is because it criticizes the media by acting like the media – it uses the system to beat the system. Arguably, a fake story told in the style of real news makes the audience laugh at how cable news networks behave, always treating stories as "breaking news". Again, political satire does not necessarily need to give a very detailed examination of the subject's flaws, but its message can be found between the lines in the way it is delivered.

A discussion of political satire would not be complete without a discussion of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart – where the famous Colbert persona was first hatched. Emmy-winning

³⁵ Jon Bershad, "One of Onion News Best Tricks: Hiring Actual Anchors as Actors," *Mediaite*, 25 Jan 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.mediaite.com/tv/one-of-onion-news-networks-best-tricks-hiring-actual-anchors-as-actors/>>.

³⁶ "Ninja Parade Slips Through Town Unnoticed Once Again," *The Onion*, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.theonion.com/video/ninja-parade-slips-through-town-unnoticed-once-aga,14181/>>.

comedian, political satirist, and media critic Jon Stewart made “fake news” one of TV’s funniest shows as he makes clever jabs at the flaws in our political system and media, particularly scrutinizing how the mainstream media polarizes issues, making theater rather than informing the public. Like *The Onion*, *The Daily Show* also parodies the stylized performance of cable news networks, opening each episode with a flashy visual display of spinning globes and an official-sounding voice announcing the date and saying, “From Comedy Central’s world news headquarters in New York, this is *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart” – before the raucous cheers of the audience and rock music takes over. This simple mimicry of the cable news network style is in itself a satirical joke demonstrating Stewart’s criticism that the mainstream news has become a spectacle.

The nature of *The Daily Show* inherently makes it a platform for both political and media critique because the show relies almost exclusively on clips of other pundits and talking heads reporting on the news, as opposed to primary source content; in this way, Stewart’s political satire can both evaluate the subject itself as well as the way the media handles the subject.

Stewart’s satirical style best described by Rachel Smolkin:

“The “Daily Show” satirizes spin, punctures pretense and belittles bombast. When a video clip reveals a politician’s backpedaling, verbal contortions or mindless prattle, Stewart can state the obvious--ridiculing such blather as it deserves to be ridiculed--or remain silent but speak volumes merely by arching an eyebrow.”³⁷

The most notable example of Stewart’s influence can be seen in a rare departure from his usual funny self when he appeared on CNN’s *Crossfire* in October 2004. Lambasting the hosts as “partisan hacks” who “fail miserably” at their “responsibility to the public discourse,” Stewart

³⁷ Rachel Smolkin, “What the Mainstream Media Can Learn from Jon Stewart,” *American Journalism Review*, Jun/Jul 2007, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4329>>.

made a sober plea for them to stop this kind of media coverage because it is “hurting America.”³⁸ Incredibly, by January 2005, *Crossfire* was cancelled, and CNN CEO Jonathan Klein publicly cited Jon Stewart’s comments as a contributing factor, saying he hoped to shift their network’s focus back to reporting the news, not talking about it.³⁹ This event “confirmed what many journalists, scholars, and even fans already knew: while [Stewart’s] influence on elections may be difficult to quantify, his influence on the state of contemporary journalism and emerging models of journalism is palpable.”⁴⁰

Back on Comedy Central turf, Jon Stewart’s tone is much lighter, and he publicly claims that his political satire aims only to be funny – he does not consider himself to be a journalist. Nonetheless, with his commentary constantly being discussed by political pundits and blogs across the internet, Stewart and *The Daily Show* undoubtedly influence the public discourse.

Media critic Melanie McFarland said that Stewart’s remarkable power is how he uses humor like a “spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine, the news, go down.”⁴¹ However, many critics, including Geoffrey Baym, have gone farther, saying that Stewart does more than make information digestible, but that his political satire is an experiment in journalism, scrutinizing issues more effectively than most mainstream news programs.⁴² Bob Lichter, of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University, said of Stewart, “He’s a satirist who has perfected the art of being taken seriously when he wants to and being taken frivolously when he

³⁸ Lisa de Moraes, “Jon Stewart, Again in the Crossfire,” *Washington Post*, 19 Oct 2004, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43775-2004Oct18.html>>.

³⁹ Bill Carter, “CNN Will Cancel ‘Crossfire’ And Cut Ties to Commentator,” *The New York Times*, 6 Jan 2005, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/06/business/media/06crossfire.html>>.

⁴⁰ Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, “The Daily Show as the New Journalism,” eds. Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, *Laughing Matters*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) 242.

⁴¹ Smolkin 1.

⁴² Geoffrey Baym, “The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication*, 22: 3, 259-276.

wants to,” which has earned him a sizable following and allows him to say what other networks won’t.⁴³ Arguably, Stewart’s disclaimer frees him of the prevailing journalistic standard to balance every viewpoint; but no matter how the public chooses to define him, it is evident that Stewart’s political satire is powerful and popular.

Of late, Stewart has brought his political satire outside the arena of media and into the real world, exemplifying another emerging trend of this genre. Most notably, on October 30, 2010, Stewart teamed up with Stephen Colbert to hold a rally on the National Mall of Washington, DC, called the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” with the stated purpose of giving other Americans a chance to be heard above the more vocal “15-20 percent who control the conversation.”⁴⁴ Whether it was a “publicity stunt, performance art project or political expression”,⁴⁵ an estimated 200,000 people turned out,⁴⁶ some donning Halloween costumes and many carrying signs “sporting a wide range of slogans, from taking a swipe at politics (“I wouldn’t care if the president was Muslim.”) to the inane (“Have you seen my keys?”).⁴⁷

In essence, the rally was a demonstration of political satire, expressed through actions as well as words, meant to take aim at how heated and theatrical the American media has become. Moreover, it illustrates political satire’s ability to transcend words, pictures, or impressions, and actually enter the real world. Despite the fact that Stewart and Colbert openly admitted the rally’s only agenda was to provide a forum for the silent majority, some critics found the lack of a clear mission as a failure, saying the comedians should have capitalized on this opportunity to

⁴³ Ari Shapiro, “Jon Stewart’s Latest Act: Sept. 11 First Responders Bill,” *National Public Radio*, 26 Dec 2010, 19 Apr 2012 <<http://www.npr.org/2010/12/26/132310870/jon-stewarts-latest-act-sept-11-responders-bill>>.

⁴⁴ Thomas Baxter, “US: Comedy sanity/fear rally attracts thousands,” *The Spy Report*, 31 Oct 2010, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.mediaspy.org/report/2010/10/31/us-comedy-sanityfear-rally-attracts-thousands/>>.

⁴⁵ Paul Harris, “Jon Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity draws marchers from across America,” *The Guardian*, 30 Oct 2010, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/oct/31/rally-restore-sanity-jon-stewart-washington>>.

⁴⁶ Shapiro 1.

⁴⁷ Baxter 1.

compel action or support a specific initiative.⁴⁸ Interestingly, this complaint reflects the growing sentiment that because political satire can be harnessed to great effect, perhaps it should be used more often to effect change, not only in the public discourse but also in the real world – a development this paper will explore further in examining Stephen Colbert’s political satire.

Through the ages, political satire as a genre has grown to become a legitimate voice in the public discourse. Its criticism not only comes in the form of irony or sarcasm, but it can also be driven by a generous dose of humor. It can exist in an abstract world of ideas or be expressed through actions in the real world. Whether it offers an in-depth and scathing commentary or a lighthearted jab, spoofing the style of its subject, this form is powerful because of the way it conveys its message. Whatever it does, political satire aims to expose the flaws in its subjects in an imaginative and memorable way, compelling audiences to consider a new perspective, and hopefully effecting political change.

Stephen Colbert’s political satire embodies many of these traits, but at the same time, he is breaking new ground as he uses political satire in remarkable ways, not only exemplifying the depth that his funny show can have, but also expanding the role of political satire as a voice in the public discourse.

ABOUT STEPHEN COLBERT

Stephen Colbert is, by trade, a comedian. While attending college at Northwestern University, he was convinced that he would go on to do “avant-garde theater, grow a beard, and perform in Hamlet.”⁴⁹ Little did he know that he would become a one-of-a-kind political satirist, making a career out of playing a character, or perhaps an exaggerated version of himself,

⁴⁸ Harris 1.

⁴⁹ Charles McGrath, “How Many Stephen Colberts Are There?,” *The New York Times*, 4 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/stephen-colbert.html?pagewanted=all>>.

which came about as an outgrowth from his regular appearances on the *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. *The Colbert Report* debuted in 2005 and quickly became one of Comedy Central's top shows, earning three Emmy Award nominations and two Peabody Awards.⁵⁰ However, this spin-off show, which airs just after *The Daily Show*, holds its own as a unique comedy that genuinely contributes to the political discourse of the nation. Indeed, some have come to regard Colbert as the new leading face of political comedy, and Stewart as the "side-kick."⁵¹

While Stephen Colbert does not employ the same witty sarcasm of his counterpart, Jon Stewart, *The Colbert Report* serves well as political satire, filling a different niche in many ways. Colbert theatrically portrays himself to be a conservative pundit, à la Sean Hannity or Bill O'Reilly, whose fervent, endearingly idiotic support of conservative beliefs is so over the top that he renders them illogical and foolish.⁵² While Colbert refers to O'Reilly as "Papa Bear," he says his character is also inspired by Stone Phillips, Bill Kurtis and especially Geraldo Rivera, saying, "I loved the way Geraldo made reporting a story seem like an act of courage."⁵³ Now with a steady following, the Colbert persona has evolved so that he can be as sober or as ludicrous as he chooses; as *The New York Times* noted, "There is now more of a winking quality to the act, a sense that we're all in on the joke."⁵⁴

The Colbert character's high self-regard and charming wit make his devotion to the right-wing seem endearing. Indeed, one study from Ohio State University found that viewers of *The Colbert Report* tend to believe Colbert supports the same party as them – Republicans interpret

⁵⁰ "The Colbert Report: Awards," *IMDb*, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0458254/awards>>.

⁵¹ Patrick Gavin, "Stephen Colbert is king in 2012 political comedy cycle," *Politico*, 1 Feb 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/72334.html#ixzz1rb8BE3p5>>.

⁵² Satire TV "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern" Geoffrey Baym

⁵³ McGrath 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

him to be Republican while Democrats interpret him to be a Democrat.⁵⁵ Although now it might be more obvious that Colbert is more critical of right-wing views, these findings reflect a marked difference in the style of Colbert's political satire compared to that of Jon Stewart. Whereas Stewart "aids viewer interpretation by offering himself as an unambiguous source and providing external cues, [...] Colbert's deadpan satire and commitment to character do not provide viewers with the external cues or source recognition that Stewart offers."⁵⁶

Colbert's approach involves clever double entendre where on the surface, he seems to praise America and its leaders, but between the lines lies the critique. His more notable tongue-in-cheek satire can be seen through a recurring segment called, "The Wørd", which parodies the "Talking Points Memo" from *The O'Reilly Factor*. Colbert chooses a word or phrase as the theme to rant about while messages on a split screen sarcastically undercut what he says.⁵⁷ For instance, Colbert did a segment on the concept of "wikiality," a word of his own creation that refers to how many corporations use Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, to create their own reality – in other words, how those with power manipulate information to their benefit.⁵⁸ Colbert unpacks his critique in a digestible way, as the words on the split screen act as a character of their own, silently highlighting the critique in his satire. (*See figure below*).

⁵⁵ Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville, and Michael A. Beam, "Irony of Satire," *International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol 14 no 2, April 2009.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ Ibid 137.



Colbert says "I'm no fan of reality" while the words beside him play with what he says.⁵⁹

Again, imitation is a form of political satire that can help viewers recall their existing perceptions of O'Reilly and then naturally journey with Colbert as he builds his own playful critique; in this way, audiences uses parallels between the two shows and can more easily recognize Colbert's perspective.

Before interviewing someone, Colbert is careful to prepare his guest, telling him or her ahead of time to expect his character to be "the biggest jerk... Just pretend I'm the drunk at a bar who won't shut up."⁶⁰ In tune with his character's self-love, Colbert inverts the introduction of the interview, having his guest already sitting at a table waiting for him; this way, Colbert can run over from his desk, wave at his cheering audience, and enjoy the limelight before taking a seat with his interviewee. His guests have the opportunity to share the new book they penned or their take on a policy issue, but then Colbert's persona comes in, earnest but asking awkward

⁵⁹ *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central, 31 July 2006.

⁶⁰ McGrath 1.

deadpan questions. For example, in a 2006, Colbert interviewed Representative Phil Gingrey as part of his “Better Know a District” series; when Gingrey explains his opposition to gay marriage and gay adoption, Colbert says, “it’s so nice to be talking with someone I agree with,” before almost immediately following it up with the question, “Where do you come down on gays having driver’s licenses?”⁶¹ Gingrey readily adds that gays “have every right” to drive a car, but already, Colbert has used his persona’s extreme stance to make Gingrey back down from his position.

Geoffrey Baym describes the Stephen Colbert character as a foil:

*“[T]he antagonist who struggles against the interviewee and forces the exchange into a form of dialectical tension. Against his conservative interviewees, Colbert often tries to “out right-wing” them, confronting their ideologies with his own absurdities. [...] Colbert’s role of foil plays a moderating function, driving the guests to step back from their more stringent positions, or at least exposing the problematic endpoints of their ‘reasoning.’”*⁶²

It is precisely this style of satire that makes Colbert so intriguing and powerful. Few other comedians have so successfully infused their own intelligent questions into their act.

This paper aims to demonstrate how Colbert’s unique brand of humor is expanding the genre of political satire as a legitimate voice in our political discourse; his contribution is best showcased through the narrative of his “Colbert Super PAC”, an entity engaging in real elections as a way to satirically demonstrate the flaws in America’s campaign finance. Before analyzing Colbert’s political satire, it is important to first look at the issue of campaign finance and Super PACs.

WHAT IS A SUPER PAC?

⁶¹ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 26 Apr 2006.

⁶² Baym, *Satire TV*, 132.

Technically defined as “independent expenditure only committees,” Super PACs raise unlimited funds from corporations, unions, and individuals; their political spending cannot go directly to a campaign, but they may spend independently.⁶³ In other words, Super PACs may raise an unlimited amount of money and release their own campaign ads, supporting or attacking the candidate of their choosing, provided that they do not coordinate with any campaign. This new brand of political action committee arose following the 2010 landmark decision of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (FEC)*, 558 U.S. ____ (2010), where the Supreme Court ruled that the political expenditures of corporations and unions are protected under the First Amendment.

2012 is already shaping up to be “The Year of the Super PAC” with political advertising and ensuing debate being driven almost exclusively by Super-PAC-funded ads, not from candidates’ campaigns.⁶⁴ One study by the Wesleyan Media Project found that Super PACs are funding 60 percent of all campaign ads in the 2012 election compared with 36 percent spent by actual candidates; this is a sharp increase from 2008, when spending by candidates amounted to 97 percent of all ad buys.⁶⁵ Moreover, the study found that as of May 2012, 70 percent of all campaign ads have been negative – that is, they mentioned an opponent; a marked difference from May 2008, when only 10 percent of the campaign ads were negative.⁶⁶ With unlimited funds for ads, Super PACs can bombard battleground states like Florida with more advertisements than usual, making for a more heated and drawn out primary season. Super

⁶³ “Independent Expenditure-Only Committees,” *Federal Election Commission* <http://www.fec.gov/press/press2011/ieoc_alpha.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Jeremy W. Peters, “Super PACs, Not Campaigns, Do Bulk of Ad Spending,” *The New York Times*, 2 Mar 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/03/us/politics/super-pacs-not-campaigns-do-bulk-of-ad-spending.html>>.

⁶⁵ “Presidential Ads 70 Percent Negative in 2012, Up From 9 Percent in 2008,” *Wesleyan Media Project: Political Advertising Analysis*, 5 May 2012 <<http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/2012/05/02/jump-in-negativity/>>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

PACs have so far affected the Republican primaries in particular, where Super PACs backed by just a few donors have become substantial funders of campaign ads, freeing GOP candidates' official campaigns to focus on other expenses, if not even worry less about grassroots fundraising. Following the Federal Election Commission (FEC) filings in January of 2012, it became clear that the GOP contender Mitt Romney had the generous support of a small number of his party's wealthiest patrons, giving well beyond the \$2,500 they could legally write to his actual campaign.⁶⁷ On the other hand, FEC filings from Democratic incumbent President Barack Obama revealed that a majority of his funds come from hundreds of "bundlers" who give up to \$2,500 to his campaign, not his Super PAC. All said, the FEC filings "revealed how recent court decisions have opened new avenues for corporate contributions into campaign politics, and how narrow the gap has become between the candidates and the theoretically independent super PACs that are backing them."⁶⁸

Critics of the *Citizens United* decision called it an unusual departure from long-standing campaign finance law, saying that the decision "wiped out a century of American history devoted to preventing corporate corruption of our democracy" and that it was a mistake to abandon the democratic tradition of restricting spending in political campaigns so that a candidate's funds would generally be proportionate to the number of his or her supporters.⁶⁹ President Obama chided the Court, saying the decision was "a green light to a new stampede of

⁶⁷ Nicholas Confessore and Michael Luo, "G.O.P. Donors Showing Thirst to Oust Obama in November," *The New York Times*, 31 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/us/politics/campaign-finance-reports-show-super-pac-donors.html?pagewanted=all>>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Robert Barnes and Dan Eggen, "Supreme Court rejects limits on corporate spending on political campaigns," *The Washington Post*, 22 Jan 2010, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/21/AR2010012104866.html?sid=ST2010082103503>>.

special interest money” – thus placing too much power in the hands of a small, wealthy elite.⁷⁰

The five justices who voted with the majority in *Citizens United* emphasized that corporations and unions merit First Amendment protections of free speech and that limiting this corporate speech amounts to the most pernicious form of government censorship; Justice Anthony M. Kennedy wrote in the majority opinion:

*“When government seeks to use its full power, including the criminal law, to command where a person may get his or her information or what distrusted source he or she may not hear, it uses censorship to control thought. This is unlawful. The First Amendment confirms the freedom to think for ourselves.”*⁷¹

Stephen Colbert was quick to scrutinize the decision and the emergence of Super PACs, using political satire to expose this change as a perversion of our democracy. While some have called Colbert’s Super PAC a farce or stunt that make a mockery of our system, no one can deny his influence on the public as his Super PAC raised over one million dollars (even more than presidential candidate Ron Paul’s Super PAC), coming almost exclusively from the small donations of fans and viewers.⁷² Many have commended Colbert for pulling back the curtain on the state of campaign finance in America today; and in April 2012, *The Colbert Report* won the prestigious Peabody Award, which honored the show’s public service for its remarkable coverage of Super PACs.⁷³ Politicians have even used Colbert as something of a leveraging tool, as when Minority Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi released a faux political ad to garner

⁷⁰ Ben Smith, “Obama on Citizens United: ‘Stampede of Social Interest Money,’” *Politico*, 21 Jan 2010, 5 May 2012 <http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/0110/Obama_on_Citizens_United_Stampede_of_special_interest_money.html>.

⁷¹ Barnes and Eggen 1.

⁷² Jon Bershad, “Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC Has Raised More Money Than Ron Paul’s Super PAC,” *Mediaite*, 26 April 2012 <<http://www.mediaite.com/tv/stephen-colberts-super-pac-has-raised-more-money-than-ron-pauls-super-pac/>>.

⁷³ Courtney Subramanian, “Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC Satire Lands Him a Peabody,” *TIME Newsfeed*, 5 April 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/04/05/stephen-colberts-super-pac-satire-lands-him-a-peabody/>>.

support for her Disclose Act, which would limit *Citizens United*; she jokingly says Colbert's Super PAC as "out of control" and "must be stopped".⁷⁴ And even long before Colbert's Super PAC, the media took note of the "Colbert Bump," a phenomenon where politicians would receive higher approval ratings from their constituents following an appearance on *The Colbert Report*.⁷⁵ So now the question begs to be answered, how did he do it?

Through an in depth discussion of segments from *The Colbert Report* and actions by Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow (ABTT), this paper aims to analyze Stephen Colbert's message and critique of changes in campaign finance, examining his political satire in four parts:

1) "Corporations are People"

Starting with his critique of *Citizens United* in 2009, Colbert highlighted the absurdity that corporations have rights by claiming they are people, even likening it to the Civil Rights Movement.

2) Creating a Super PAC

It was not until 2011 that Colbert began pursuing having his own Super PAC, which quickly became the prevailing narrative of his show as he unpacked the complexities of campaign finance for the American public to see.

3) Ads & Actions of Colbert Super PAC

⁷⁴ Frank James, "Nancy Pelosi 'Slams' Stephen Colbert's SuperPAC in 'Ad' for DISCLOSE Act," *National Public Radio*, 10 Feb 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2012/02/10/146692686/nancy-pelosi-slams-stephen-colbert-for-superpac-in-ad-for-disclose-act>>.

⁷⁵ James H. Fowler, "The Colbert Bump in Campaign Donations: More Truthful Than Truthy," *PS: Political Science and Politics (APSA)*, Jul 2008 Vol 41 No 3.

After finally gaining FEC approval for his Super PAC, called “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” Colbert released campaign ads to demonstrate both the danger of Super PACs’ unchecked power and perhaps to critique flaws in the electoral process.

4) **Jon Stewart Takes Over Colbert Super PAC**

When Colbert decided to explore running for President of South Carolina, he temporarily transferred control of his Super PAC to friend and fellow satirist Jon Stewart, thus exposing the ease with which Super PACs could be manipulated.

“CORPORATIONS ARE PEOPLE”

Long before creating his Super PAC, Colbert used political satire to show the incongruity in recognizing constitutional rights for corporations. On September 15, 2009, just after the Supreme Court heard *Citizens United*, Colbert interviewed Jeffrey Toobin, a senior legal analyst from CNN, to discuss the history of how corporations came to be seen as having constitutional rights. Toobin explained that in 1886, in the case of *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, 118 U.S. 394 (1886), one justice said in passing that corporations were people, but the court reporter took it down, and it has been cited ever since.⁷⁶ To this, Colbert asked in his typical beady-eyed mania, “Are you saying the most powerful man in America is the court reporter for the Supreme Court?”, thereby playfully pointing out the shaky ground of this long-standing precedent.

Colbert went on to say, “I understand how corporations are people... What I don't understand is how Mexicans are people,” thus highlighting the incongruity in giving non-living

⁷⁶ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 15 Sept 2009.

entities more rights than human beings, also referencing the issue of immigrant rights.⁷⁷ During “The Wørd,” Colbert defined, “Let Freedom Ka-Ching,” claiming it makes sense for corporations to have rights because “they do everything people do except breathe, die, and go to jail for dumping 1.3 million pounds of PCBs into the Hudson River”⁷⁸ – a reference to the scandal under the General Electric Company that happened in the 1970s but continues to effect the environment and public health today.⁷⁹ By weaving in relevant facts, Colbert’s political satire is not only funny, but it also shares a more in-depth criticism.

After conceding that corporations lack human body parts, Colbert turned the argument on its head, saying this is precisely why corporations need the right to fund their speech: “Corporations can’t speak like us – they don’t have mouths or hands,” meanwhile the split screen reads, “Just a giant middle finger.”⁸⁰ In this example, Colbert’s satire is rather simple as the message translates to the idea that corporations are self-serving, but it makes for a well-crafted pun, so the humor does its job in making its critique memorable.

To illustrate the point that unlimited funds for campaign ads could lead to unpredictable elections where the wrong people get put in office, Colbert suggested people write their votes on dollar bills; he demonstrates by taking out a one hundred dollar bill and writing, “President... Taylor... Swift!,” saying this would be like giving one hundred votes to the country pop singer.⁸¹ Here, Colbert’s political satire effectively evokes the audience’s understanding or memory of poll taxes, allowing them to recognize the link he sees between unrestricted campaign funds and inequality. As the segment plays out, Colbert’s reasoning grows more bizarre but remains

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “Just the Facts: Cleaning Up Hudson River PCBs,” *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*, 5 Oct 2010, 5 May 2012 <http://www.epa.gov/hudson/just_facts_08_04.htm>.

⁸⁰ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 15 Sept 2009.

⁸¹ Ibid.

entertaining, a satirical interplay to compel the audience to consider how much power corporations already have and to question whether they deserve rights.

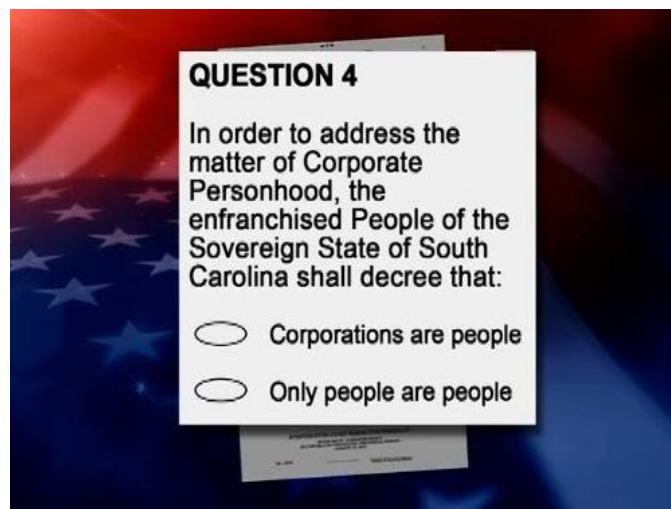
Colbert's political satire about corporate rights became a recurring theme on his show. For example, he likened corporation's rights to the Civil Rights Movement in an interview with former senator, Russ Feingold, who opposes the emergence of Super PACs. Colbert makes the tongue-in-cheek assertion that because there are fewer corporations than people, they constitute a minority group, and that Feingold is guilty of discrimination because he "wants to muzzle the voices of the minority corporations in the political process."⁸² Likewise, on a visit to see the protesters at Occupy Wall Street, Colbert found a sign that read, "Corporations are not people", and suggested it could be, "Corporations are *now* people" (emphasis added); when his guests expressed dislike for that suggestion, Colbert offered, "Are they three-fifths of a person?" – alluding to when America's founding fathers compromised to allow slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person for representation in the House.⁸³ Again, drawing false parallels helped the audience see the absurdity in corporate rights.

At this point, Colbert's political satire was pointed and humorous enough to watch simply as entertainment, but because it appeared within the confines of his show, his satire was more like commentary from the sidelines, not yet engaged in the actual arena of campaign finance. However, by the time Colbert obtained his own Super PAC in June of 2011, his political satire could enter into the real world. In particular, after the Iowa State Fair in August of 2011, when Mitt Romney made the much-talked-about gaffe of telling a heckler, "Corporations are people,

⁸² *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 28 Apr 2011.

⁸³ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 1 Nov 2011.

my friend”, Colbert had more fodder to enliven his criticism.⁸⁴ Romney’s admission instantly became a sound bite that Democrats cited as evidence of Romney’s misplaced priorities, blemishing his campaign.⁸⁵ Having already taken the faux stance of advocating for corporation’s rights on his show, it was a natural fit for Colbert’s Super PAC. In September 2011, Colbert made an offer to purchase the naming rights for the South Carolina GOP primary as well as a nonbinding ballot referendum to ask voters if they believed “corporations are people” or “only people are people” – obviously a jab at Mitt Romney (see sample ballot below).⁸⁶



Sample ballot sent to Colbert with his referendum.⁸⁷

Incredibly, South Carolina Republicans initially agreed to include Colbert’s question and even printed ballots with his referendum. South Carolina Republican Party executive director Matt Moore reasoned that it might even be a good way to attract a younger demographic and (rather oddly) said they trusted Colbert because, “he promised not to lampoon us or make the party look

⁸⁴ Philip Rucker, “Mitt Romney says ‘Corporations are People’ at Iowa State Fair,” *The Washington Post*, 11 Aug 2011, 5 May 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mitt-romney-says-corporations-are-people/2011/08/11/gIQABwZ38I_story.html>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ McGrath 1.

⁸⁷ Screen shot from *The Colbert Report*.

bad in any way. He made it clear that his interest was in bringing attention to a cause that is close to his heart – namely, the influence of corporate money in politics.”⁸⁸

The plan fell through though after the state Supreme Court ruled that the counties, not the party, had to pay for the primary and that there could be no referendum on the ballot; essentially, they warned it could invalidate the election.⁸⁹ However, Colbert did not give up there; *The New York Times* describes the situation:

*“When the Republicans declined to pursue the matter, Colbert made the same offer to the state’s Democrats, who filed an appeal. Even Colbert seemed a little surprised, pointing out that he had repeatedly warned both the Republicans and the Democrats that his aims were satirical and that their very willingness to negotiate with him could become a joke on the show. “It turns out that both sides are happy to take my money,” he said.”*⁹⁰

In a final plea, Colbert wrote an op-ed for a South Carolina newspaper in December of 2011, offering \$500,000 from his Super PAC to the Republicans if they would reconsider joining the Democrats in helping him secure the ballot initiative and naming rights for the primary; he wrote, “Call it a Christmas miracle. I’ve already filled out the check, and to prove it’s no joke, I’ve written ‘No Joke’ in the memo line.”⁹¹ Likewise, in January 2012, Colbert’s Super PAC – under the control of Jon Stewart – released its first ad in South Carolina, an attack on Mitt Romney as “Mitt the Ripper.” With the reasoning that “corporations are people,” Romney, who broke up corporations for sale while serving as head of Bain Capital, must be a serial killer.

⁸⁸ Gloria Goodale, “Stephen Colbert almost bought naming rights to South Carolina GOP primary,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 Dec 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Elections/Vox-News/2011/1209/Stephen-Colbert-almost-bought-naming-rights-to-South-Carolina-GOP-primary>>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ McGrath 1.

⁹¹ Stephen Colbert, Guest Editorial, *The State*, 22 Dec 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.thestate.com/2011/12/22/2088020/op-ed-naming-rights-state-mottos.html>>.



"Mitt the Ripper", a serial killer that destroys corporations

In the end, Colbert failed to purchase either naming rights for the primary or the referendum, but his scheme and attack ad against Mitt Romney were widely discussed in the media for how remarkably far he was able to incorporate his political satire into an actual election. It was certainly an unusual step for parties to play the comedy card, and some political strategists such as David Johnson saw the event as a mistake, saying “[The parties] were clearly dazzled by the potential donation and now they have egg all over their face.”⁹²

Whether or not it was Colbert’s primary aim to inject mania into the political process, his criticism of corporate rights had pervaded the election and arguably reached more people because of the increased media attention. He took a technical, seemingly boring issue, and made it accessible, showing why it mattered. Moreover, his efforts exemplify a remarkable development in the genre of political satire, proving that a playful way of critique can be conveyed through real world actions as much as words.

CREATING A SUPER PAC

⁹² Goodale 1.

The process of getting a Super PAC played out with much fanfare as Colbert took his audience with him step by step, bringing greater transparency to the complexities of campaign finance. In the tradition of classic political satire, Colbert used his show as a venue for playful criticism, using humor and irony. Then with the actual creation of his Super PAC, Colbert pushed political satire to new heights as his character engaged with real world experts and institutions to make his point – ironically, using the system to beat the system.

On March 30, 2011, Colbert announced on his show that he would be filing to create his own political action committee, “Colbert PAC,” and in preparation, he consulted Trevor Potter, former chairman of the FEC and general counsel to John McCain’s campaign in 2008. The following dialogue is an excerpt from this episode⁹³:

Colbert: *Can I spend [PAC money] on other things besides politics? Let's say I'm Sarah Palin, and I got a couple million dollars, can I use that to like take private jets to go someplace?*

Potter: *You can.*

Colbert: *I can? [Colbert grins and the audience laughs] Now you say I can also use this money for advertising. Does the person I'm advertising for have to agree to me advertising for them? Or could I use my money to advertise for someone who doesn't even want me to advertise for them? [Audience laughs]*

Potter: *Even if they want you to do it, they can't agree to it. You have to do it independently.*

Colbert: *So I can't ask them whether they want me to. I just have to pick a candidate and do ads for them, and I can use that PAC money for that too. [Colbert looks pensive while audience laughs]*

Potter: *Yes.*

Colbert: *Is there any reason I wouldn't want a PAC?*

Potter: *Well, you'd want to be careful if you had a PAC—*

Colbert: *Yes, let's say “if” I had a PAC*

Potter: *--that you complied with all the rules, filled out all the forms, filed them with the Federal Election Commission – because if you didn't do that, you'd be responsible for breaking the law.*

Colbert: *Yeah... uh huh. [Colbert smiles like he is scheming as audience laughs]*

Potter: *You wouldn't want to do that.*

Colbert: *No, I wouldn't want to do that at all! Do a lot of people go to jail for breaking the law with their PACs?*

⁹³ The Colbert Report, Comedy Central, 30 Mar 2011.

Potter: No...

Colbert: Can you name anyone who's gone to jail for breaking the law with their PACs?

Potter: Not a person.

Colbert: Ah ha! That's my kind of law! [Audience laughs and cheers] Folks, what do you think? Do you want your voices heard in the form of my voice? [Audience cheers] Do you Colbert Nation want to be players in the 2012 campaign? [Audience cheers]

By serving as a surrogate for the audience, asking questions about a topic most people would otherwise consider dull, Colbert taught about PACs to his audience through his funny political satire.

Remarkably, Trevor Potter agreed to serve as Colbert's personal lawyer and adviser on his PAC efforts, and has since had a recurring presence on the show. In an interview with *National Public Radio (NPR)*, Potter said of his role:

*"I'm very careful not to ascribe motive to him — he can speak for himself. I don't know what he's thinking. He can find the laws ironic or funny or absurd. But he's illustrating how the system works by using it. By starting a super PAC, creating a (c)4, filing with the F.E.C., he can bring the audience inside the system. He can show them how it works and then leave them to conclude whether this is how it ought to work."*⁹⁴

Potter's comments speak to the fact that Colbert is using political satire in an innovative way, still being funny and entertaining without sacrificing the depth of his criticism.

Two weeks later, on April 14, 2011, Colbert received a letter from his parent company, Viacom, saying he could not legally have a PAC because the air time on his show would be considered a political contribution. Colbert read the letter aloud to his audience, suggesting that the company wanted to avoid any controversy of backlash from the public; he added facetiously, "For the first time ever, someone's dream was ruined by a giant corporation."⁹⁵ However, not to

⁹⁴ McGrath 1.

⁹⁵ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 14 Apr 2011.

be undone, Colbert brought Potter back on his show; again, playing a deferential role, he allows a real life expert to take the lead and teach audiences about Super PACs and how he can file one. Potter explains that even though Colbert cannot have a PAC, “there’s another way,” explaining that Super PACs can take unlimited funds from corporations, and walking Colbert and his audience through the process. Ironically, as Super PACs are relatively new to campaign finance, the FEC had not yet changed the application process, and so Potter guides Colbert in filling out the same forms as before but with the addition of a cover letter, stating his intention to create a Super PAC:⁹⁶

Potter: *All you have to do is send a cover letter to the commission that says this PAC is actually a Super PAC.*

Colbert: *Where would I get a letter like that?*

Potter: *I happen to have brought one for you.*

Colbert: *Oh! [Colbert reads portions of the cover letter aloud] “It therefore intends to raise individual, corporate and labor funds in unlimited amounts”? Oh I like the sound of that. “Unlimited”’s got a certain poetry about it. Here’s my form [pointing out the original PAC form], that’s a regular PAC that cannot take money or a gift in-kind from Viacom.*

[Colbert places the cover letter on top] Now... it’s a Super PAC?

[Colbert demonstrates by taking away the cover letter again] “PAC.”

[Replacing it back on top] “Super PAC!”

Potter: *There you go.*

With this theatrical demonstration, Colbert highlights the surprising ease with which he can obtain a Super PAC. He continues to bring up this flaw in a later episode when he explains to the audience that because he could not have a PAC, he “did the right thing and exploited a loophole.”⁹⁷ On one episode, Colbert juxtaposes the simplicity of the process with great flourish by jogging across the stage with sirens blaring to show the audience a large touch screen monitor that he calls “The Loophole-ulator 6400,” where he momentarily outlines the process: “Now to

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 11 May 2011.

form a Super PAC and get unlimited corporate money, you fill out the application for a regular PAC, add a cover letter saying it is a Super PAC, and... then... that's it!", before jogging back to his desk while the audience laughs (see screen shot below).⁹⁸



Colbert shows audiences the "Loophole-ulator 6400", which outlines the Super PAC application process.

In this instance, Colbert's political satire comes in the form of physical irony. His theatrical fanfare leads the audience to anticipate a more rigorous process; in this way, they share his expectation that a democracy should have more careful checks to regulate powerful entities like Super PACs. When the application process falls surprisingly short, audiences realize the point in Colbert's satire: Super PACs are a dangerous loophole that damage the integrity of the American democracy.

⁹⁸ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 28 Apr 2011.

On May 11, 2011, Colbert shared another letter from Viacom, which he was explicitly asked not to read aloud on his show; choosing instead to make a jab at the media empire's apparent unwillingness to support his Super PAC, Colbert paraphrased their letter:

"We are stupid lawyers who hate fun. If you do this, we're all scared people might get mad at us. I think we just peed a little. So, even though we know it is totally legal and everything, and everybody wants you to do it, we're not going to let you. Sincerely, Admiral John Q. Buzzshackler, Esq."

By paraphrasing what was undoubtedly a more discreet and serious (if not, boring) letter, Colbert demonstrated in very colloquial terms that the media is too cowardly to spend time discussing and pursuing important issues like campaign finance. Then, feigning a childish tantrum, Colbert whined that he hates his parent company and that other parent companies let their people do whatever they want, specifically citing Karl Rove as a paid employee of Fox News who regularly talks about his Super PAC, American Crossroads, on his show.⁹⁹ In one fell swoop, Colbert managed to lambast the media for not supporting genuine efforts to dig into controversial issues, while also pointing out the bias on Fox News.

Finally, on May 13, 2011, Colbert officially filed a request for his own Super PAC, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow", along with a media exemption because of his show, and invited his viewers to come support him at the offices of the FEC in Washington, DC. Making a funny speech spoofing the way many candidates talk with constituents – complete with a story about an everyday guy who asked for his help, Colbert solicited donations from the crowd, giving handshakes for a dollar apiece.¹⁰⁰ Again, Colbert took his political satire into the real world of campaign finance, actually encouraging his viewers to participate in the political process with him.

⁹⁹ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 11 May 2011.

¹⁰⁰ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 16 May 2011.

In the 60 days between filing and hearing back from the FEC, Colbert continued to rally support for his soon-to-be Super PAC while also disclosing the nuances of campaign finance regulations on his show. For example, in May of 2011, the media buzz around Sarah Palin's bus tour across the United States had some hopeful Republicans wondering if she might still announce her candidacy for president. As the Los Angeles Times reported, Palin's bus tour to Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and a pizza lunch with Donald Trump "may not have telegraphed serious presidential intentions but at least gave her another day of something immeasurable: attention."¹⁰¹ Colbert invited Trevor Potter onto the show to ask him how Palin could fund her trip with her Super PAC money, framing it as if his character were also interested in going on a Super PAC-paid vacation. Potter explained that even though people might be donating to Palin's Super PAC because they thought she would run for president, her actions still technically abided by FEC regulations because she was not officially a federal candidate, which would bar her from using her own Super PAC funds for personal use; to this, Colbert reasoned, "So you have to be a sort of a PAC-tease."¹⁰²

His comment was not only a swipe at Palin's coy relationship with American politics and the media, but it again illustrates how Colbert serves as a proxy for the audience, yielding to an expert to translate the legalese, thus portraying Super PACs as a thinly veiled excuse for politicians to dupe people for personal gain. This also illustrates how Colbert's unique humor and commitment to character helped him transform an otherwise boring conversation about FEC regulations into a more enjoyable story about how he too could exploit a Super PAC; that is,

¹⁰¹ Robin Abcarian, "Sarah Palin's bus tour steals spotlight from GOP presidential candidates," *The Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/31/nation/la-na-0601-palin-analysis-20110601>>.

¹⁰² *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 31 May 2011.

because viewers are familiar with the Colbert persona and his endearing selfishness, they can enjoy and learn from watching his character navigate the facts.

On the same episode, Colbert invited Trevor Potter onto the show to help him answer thirteen “serious legal questions” that the FEC sent him about how he planned to manage both his show and a Super PAC. Colbert used this as an opportunity to portray the FEC’s earnest efforts to regulate campaign finance as relatively useless against the power of media. For example, one FEC question asked, “How does the current Viacom/Comedy Central review and approval process work?”, to which Colbert answered, “There’s no approval, I get to say what I want [...] How can I prove they have no approval over what I say... ‘Head of Viacom Sumner Redstone is demon spawn who feasts on the flesh of children’ – they would not approve that.” Arguably, Colbert’s treatment of the Super PAC process is a mockery, but at the same time, that is precisely his point: his political satire uses the system to beat the system because he finds it inherently broken.

Colbert does not ridicule the FEC’s genuine efforts at preserving the integrity of campaigns so much as he highlights the futility in their regulations. For instance, upon hearing that the FEC had taken great interest in following him, Colbert acted as if he appreciated their hard work and offered to use his Super PAC to raise their salaries; to this, Potter cautioned that attempted bribery could get him into trouble, but Colbert quickly replied, “Well I thought attempted bribery was officially free speech now.”¹⁰³ Such wordplay is a mark of classic political satire as Colbert uses wit to show audiences the inconsistency between FEC intentions and campaign finance in action.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

And finally, on June 30, 2011, Colbert and his lawyer, Potter, went to Washington, DC for his FEC hearing, and by a vote of 5-1, the body approved his Super PAC, “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow”, with the provision that Viacom disclose any help it gives to Colbert outside of his show.¹⁰⁴ The media swarmed to cover the event, and fans even camped outside the steps of the FEC the night before in support of his Super PAC – all telling signs that Colbert’s irresistible political satire had successfully shed light on an important, but perhaps boring issue. Speaking before a crowd outside the steps of the FEC, he said:

“Now some people have asked, 'Is this some kind of joke?' Well I personally don't think that participating in democracy is a joke. I don't think that wanting to know what the rules are, is a joke. [...] Of course, there will be others who say, 'Stephen Colbert, what will you do with that unrestricted Super PAC money?' To which I say I don't know. Give it to me, and let's find out. 'Cause I don't know about you, but I do not accept limits on my free speech. [Crowd cheers] I don't know about you, but I do not accept the status quo. [Crowd cheers] But I do accept Visa, Mastercard, and American Express. Thank you! [Colbert collects donations from the crowd]”¹⁰⁵

In response to the creation of Colbert’s Super PAC, some policy experts, such as John Samples of the Cato Institute, have said that Colbert’s performance failed to portray *Citizens United* as damaging because it only “made clear to many people that campaign finance is actually pretty complex and difficult to get through.”¹⁰⁶ However, arguably, Colbert never intended to make the process look easy; his objective was to bring transparency to campaign finance, an institution he acknowledges is complex and therefore worth examining given its importance to American democracy. Indeed, through the theatrical saga of pursuing and

¹⁰⁴ Dan Eggen, “FEC allows Stephen Colbert to form ‘Super PAC’ for 2012 elections,” *The Washington Post*, 30 Jun 2011, 5 May 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/fec-allows-colbert-to-form-super-pac-for-2012-elections/2011/06/30/AGxVGBsH_story.html>.

¹⁰⁵ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 30 Jun 2011.

¹⁰⁶ John Samples, “Stephen Colbert’s Super PAC, the FEC and Citizens United,” *CATO Institute*, 5 Jul 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.cato.org/multimedia/cato-video/stephen-colberts-superpac-fec-citizens-united>>.

obtaining a real Super PAC, Colbert used political satire to engage his audience on a field trip of campaign finance.

ADS & ACTIONS OF COLBERT SUPER PAC

With “Americans for Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” officially underway, Colbert quickly began raising money and using his Super PAC as a vehicle for his next message: with their “independent” ads, Super PACs can be reckless with their unchecked power.

Besides trying to purchase naming rights and a referendum in the South Carolina GOP primary, Colbert used his Super PAC for a variety of causes, perhaps driven in part by whatever his audiences found engaging, but above all, Colbert used his Super PAC as political satire on campaign finance; in the words of philosopher Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message.”¹⁰⁷ On July 12, 2011, Colbert announced on his show that of the “buffet” of contenders for the GOP candidacy, his Super PAC would be endorsing Herman Cain, and that he hoped to have Cain sign a pledge for ABTT; although Colbert had no idea yet what the pledge would be for, he knew every other Republican Super PAC had created pledges of their own, and ABTT would certainly not be left out. Just a few weeks later, when FEC filings reported that Newt Gingrich’s campaign was one million dollars in debt, Colbert decided to go on record saying he would support the former Speaker of the House.¹⁰⁸ In essence, Colbert’s Super PAC served first and foremost as a way to critique campaign finance and the electoral process, not necessarily as a way to endorse candidates.

For example, Colbert emphasized the fact that Super PACs can raise unlimited funds by displaying a fundraising thermometer with the goal of “infinity dollars”; and to “seduce the

¹⁰⁷ Gerald J. Erion, “Amusing ourselves to Death with Television News: Jon Stewart, Neil Postman, and the Huxleyan Warning,” ed. Jason Holt, *The Daily Show and Philosophy* (MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 6.

¹⁰⁸ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 19 July 2011.

prudent”, Colbert had the names of his donors listed in a “Heroes Crawl,” saying that according to the FEC, “this is 100 percent legal and at least 10 percent ethical” (see screen shot below).¹⁰⁹



Colbert lists his donors to "seduce the prudent" into giving to his Super PAC.

Likewise, Colbert showed that Super PACs can use their money to do anything by creating “Turtles don’t like peanut butter” t-shirts (for sale on his Super PAC’s website), and featuring a spam loaf wearing glasses, named “Ham Rove” (after Karl Rove), as his Super PAC’s political consultant and catering, all in one.¹¹⁰ Then a few months later, when Colbert interviewed protesters of Occupy Wall Street, he tried to buy them off with Super PAC money: while proposing his deal to them, he offered them a lavish breakfast complete with mimosas and hired a Japanese masseuse to rub their backs, in the hopes that they might bend to his request and let him rule their movement.¹¹¹

Arguably these were harmless and silly stunts, but with the creation of its first campaign ads, ABTT exemplified how Super PACs could flood the media with whatever wild messages

¹⁰⁹ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 18 July 2011.

¹¹⁰ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 28 July 2011.

¹¹¹ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 1 Nov 2011.

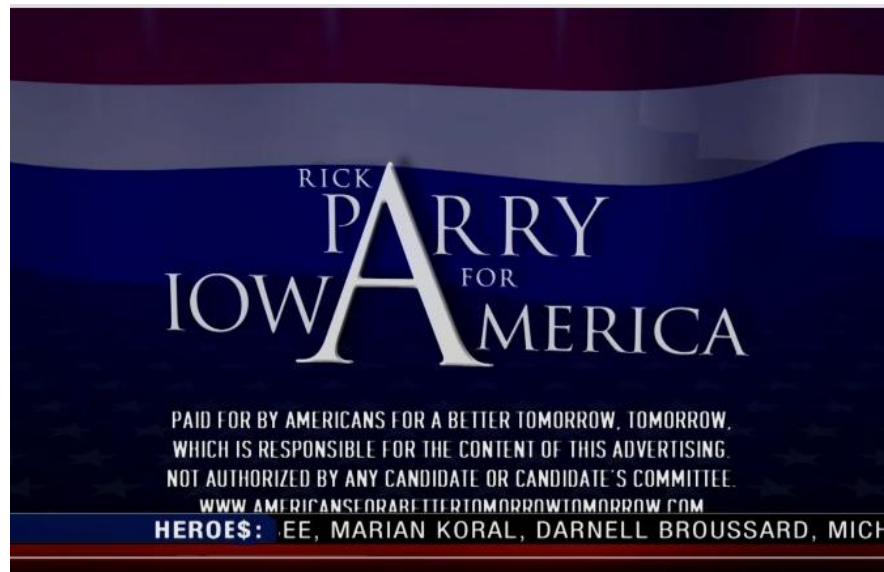
they chose, potentially skewing the public's understanding of current issues and candidates. ABTT released two campaign ads before the Ames Straw Poll, criticizing Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, for having a plethora of Super PACs supporting his nomination for president before he even declared his candidacy. Mimicking the style of typical campaign ads, ABTT's ads started with sweeping images of fields and farmers, saying, "Iowa... a land of good people who can make up their own mind," before spoofing the sinister style of attack ads, saying, "But outside groups like Jobs of Iowa Super PAC are trying to pander to Iowans with pro-Perry ads featuring cheap *cornography*... [a censored image of corn] that your kids could see... just so you'll vote for Rick Perry at the Ames Straw Poll" (emphasis added). The ad then proceeded to appeal to "Iowa's basest *kernel* instincts" and showed a montage of hot, buttery corn with a sensual soundtrack – all as a satirical spoof on campaign advertising. While there was little substantive message in this ad, it was thoroughly entertaining for audiences; moreover, it helped the audience step back from campaigns and see how their emotions were being manipulated. Likewise, another ABTT ad encouraged Republican Iowans to write in "Richard Parry" (as in the fencing move) – with an "a" for "America" and "IowA" (see screen shot below)¹¹²; the ads ran on two television stations in Des Moines, although a third, WOI-TV refused because it might confuse voters.¹¹³

This brings up a common criticism of Colbert's political satire: is he just making a mockery of the system and thus damaging America's democracy even more? Or, is Colbert's satire accessible enough for people to see his points and make informed decisions? Given his remarkable following and constant attention by media critics, it seems that the latter is more

¹¹² "Colbert Super PAC ads," 5 May 2012 <<http://www.colbertsuperpac.com/episodeiv-anewhope/index.php>>.

¹¹³ David Carr, "Comic's PAC Is More Than a Gag," *The New York Times*, 21 Aug 2011, 5 May 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/22/business/media/stephen-colberts-pac-is-more-than-a-gag.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all>.

likely true; Colbert's Super PAC work is more than just novel, it is an entertaining new way for the public to learn. He is popular both for his humor as well as his remarkable wit and intellect; the combination makes for a sensational way to engage the public, and Colbert happens to focus on politics.



In the end, straw poll canvassers did indeed count votes for “Ricky Parry”, and although they were credited to the Texas governor,¹¹⁴ Colbert's Super PAC still made a significant mark, if only by stirring the media with his political satire in action.

Colbert continued to use this new form of satire to expose loopholes in campaign finance, as when he created a “sister PAC” called “Colbert Super PAC Shh!”, which would allow his Super PAC to remain even more anonymous. On September 29, 2011, Colbert discussed how Karl Rove's Super PAC quickly and anonymously raised \$5.1 million, up from the \$200, all thanks to his new 501(c)4. Thinking of doing the same, Colbert asked Trevor Potter to guide him through the process. Potter explained that because corporations' names would be disclosed

¹¹⁴ Mark Joyella, “Ames Straw Poll Write-In Votes Went To Parry, Paylin, Obama and the Butter Cow,” *Mediaite*, 18 Aug 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.mediaite.com/online/ames-straw-poll-votes-went-to-parry-paylin-obama-and-the-butter-cow/>>.

in their donation to Super PACs and they did not want to offend their shareholders, many Super PACs created sister PACs; technically known as a 501(c)4, a sister PAC is essentially a quickly created corporation that does no business and has no employees, so it functions only to gather secret donations and give them to Super PACs under their company name rather than the names of the individual donors. Moreover, by the time the Super PACs had to disclose their donors with the FEC in May 2013, it would already be six months after the presidential election, minimizing any backlash from the public. Feigning greed and excitement, Colbert signed the forms for his own sister PAC, saying:

“That’s my kind of campaign finance restriction... without this, I’m transparent... With it, I’m opaque... Without it, you get to know... With it, you go to hell! Without it, here’s who gave me my money. With it, you know what? Ya mutha gave me the money! I like that, Trev!”¹¹⁵

And because his Super PAC’s donations were now entirely secret, he eliminated the Heroes Crawl. Again, Colbert created an actual 501(c)4 as a form of real-world political satire, using the system to beat the system.

Other ads released by Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow featured: the NBA lockout – not related to electoral campaigns, but again, demonstrating that Super PACs can do anything they want with their money; as well as an anti-Super PAC message endorsed by Republican politician Buddy Roemer, who says he can legally be featured in the ad because it is about issues, not his campaign – thus highlighting the flimsy FEC regulations that Super PACs must be independent.¹¹⁶

JON STEWART TAKES OVER COLBERT SUPER PAC

¹¹⁵ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 29 Sept 2011.

¹¹⁶ “Colbert Super PAC ads,” 5 May 2012 <<http://www.colbertsuperpac.com/episodeiv-anewhope/index.php>>.

Proving that there are not only a million funny ways to get his message across, but that there are still flaws and loopholes in campaign finance to expose, Colbert temporarily transferred power over his Super PAC to his friend and Comedy Central counterpart, Jon Stewart.

It started in early January 2012, when Public Policy Polling announced that in South Carolina, Colbert was polling ahead of Jon Huntsman, who was actually running for president. Colbert addressed the surprising news on his show, and then on January 12, 2012, he announced that he would again consider a run for the White House, or at least form an “exploratory committee” for his possible bid as “the President of the United States of South Carolina” – if that was even possible.¹¹⁷ Beforehand, however, Colbert invited his lawyer, Trevor Potter to advise him on how he could both run for office and have a Super PAC:

Colbert: *Can I run for president and keep my Super PAC? Don't sugarcoat it.*

Potter: *No.*

Colbert: *Ok that was a little less sugar than I was looking for. Why?*

Potter: *You cannot be a candidate and run a Super PAC. That would be coordinating with yourself [...] but you could have it run by somebody else.*

Colbert: *Wait. Wait what? Someone else can take it over?*

Potter: *Yes, but someone who you would not be coordinating with in terms of PAC ads and strategy.*

Colbert: *Oh Trevor, I wouldn't want to even create the appearance of electoral skullduggery. If that's a word I can say on a family show, but I think there may be a guy. Jon? [Audience cheers as Jon Stewart comes out] Jon Stewart everybody! [...] Jon, let me ask you, are you here to take over Colbert Super PAC? [...]*

Stewart: *I would be honored, but [speaking hushed] can we do this though because you and I are also business partners... we're about to open up that combination bagel shop*

Colbert: *-and travel agency.*

Stewart: *From shmear to eternity, is that right? So I don't know...*

Colbert: *Trevor, is being business partners a problem?*

Potter: *Being business partners does not count as coordination, legally.*

Stewart: *Great!*

Colbert: *Alright, alright, that's pretty good.*

Stewart: *W-w-wait! But I assume there's reams of complicated paperwork to be executed before we transfer the reigns of power for something as critical to our democracy as a Super PAC.*

¹¹⁷ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 12 Jan 2012.

Colbert: Trevor?

Potter: I brought the one document with me.

Colbert: Oh that's great.

Stewart: That's double spaced. [...]

[Colbert and Stewart each sign the form before taking hands together in a "transfer of power".]

Colbert: Trevor, if you will?

Potter: Colbert Super PAC transfer activate! [A green light and dollar signs flow from Colbert to Stewart; Colbert is left weak while Stewart cheers in his green light.]

Colbert: Colbert... Colbert Super PAC is dead.

Stewart: But it has been reborn as the "Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC"!

Stewart: "Now that I have the Super PAC, can I run ads for Stephen Colbert who I believe in very deeply and perhaps attacking his potential opponents, who I don't believe in at all?"

Potter: Yes you can, as long as you don't coordinate. [Stewart giggles with excitement.]

Colbert: Well that's interesting. [Colbert smiles coyly]

Stewart: Red flag! I'm busy

Colbert: Well of course, you have a show.

Stewart: Can I legally hire Stephen's current Super PAC staff to produce these ads that will be in no way coordinated with Stephen?

Potter: Yes-- [Colbert and Stephen giggle and clap excitedly.] as long as they have no knowledge of Stephen's plans.

Colbert: Well that's easy, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. Ok, Jon I guess you'd better leave. I can't let you know what I'm doing.

Stewart: I don't want to know! Lalalalalala

Colbert: From now on Jon, I'll just have to talk about my plans on my television show, and take the risk that you might watch it.

Stewart: I don't even know when its on--11:30 Monday through Thursday.

[Segment ends with Colbert, Stewart, and Potter putting their hands together and yelling, "Non-coordination!"]

Again, through the use of this theatrical dialogue with two well-loved personas and an expert, Colbert transformed a dull subject into a sitcom-like way of teaching his audience. Moreover, with a legally-binding transfer of his Super PAC, Colbert put his real life political satire to work once again. Through this entertaining segment, Colbert showed viewers that Super PACs were not nearly as independent as their name would suggest and that giving such power to a close friend could be as easy as signing on the dotted line.

Under Stewart's control, the "Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC" released an ad on January 16, 2012, just before the South Carolina GOP primary, that asked voters to choose Herman Cain – while all the images featured Stephen Colbert. It was widely known that Cain withdrew from the race months before, but he was still listed on the ballot, so ABTT made a jab at the fact that the electoral process failed to reflect reality. On January 18, 2012, just two days after featuring a seemingly pro-Colbert ad, ABTT released a second ad, this time ironically attacking Colbert as a way of proving that Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow was not coordinating with its former owner. Narrated by actor Samuel L. Jackson spoofing his old movie, "Snakes on a Plane," the ad accused Colbert of turning the South Carolina election into a circus, and questioning, "Why is the T in his name silent? What else is he hiding – letting murderers out of jail?"¹¹⁸ The ad then concludes with another endorsement of Herman Cain.

Meanwhile, Colbert held a mock rally for Cain in South Carolina, and surprisingly, Herman Cain agreed to join him despite no longer being in the race. Drawing an estimated 3,300 attendees, the Colbert-Cain rally was more popular than any actual presidential event in the 2012 South Carolina primary.¹¹⁹ It is unlikely that anyone believed Cain was truly thinking of getting back in the race, but Colbert may have had some kind of impact on voters as Cain won 6,324 votes or a little over one percent of the vote, coming in at fifth place.¹²⁰

By the end of January 2012, in another theatrical display – complete with electric green light force, Colbert took back his Super PAC from Stewart; and at about the same time, Super

¹¹⁸ "Colbert Super PAC ads," 5 May 2012 <<http://www.colbertsuperpac.com/episodeiv-anewhope/index.php>>.

¹¹⁹ Sam Stein, "Stephen Colbert, Herman Cain Hold Rally in South Carolina," *Huffington Post*, 12 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/20/stephen-colbert-herman-cain-south-carolina-rally_n_1219136.html>.

¹²⁰ "South Carolina Republican Primary," *The New York Times*, 21 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/primaries/states/south-carolina>>.

PACs were filing their reports to the FEC for disclosure, another opportunity for Colbert to pull back the curtain on campaign finance.

CONCLUSION

While the news media picked apart the FEC filings of many prominent Super PACs, Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow became the subject of discussion as the American public could finally see the sheer power of Colbert and his Super PAC, which had raised a whopping \$1,023,121.24 as of January 31, 2012.¹²¹ Coming almost exclusively from private donors – or as Colbert called them, “heroes”, the donors were a diverse bunch, mostly giving in increments of \$250, from Gavin Newsom, the lieutenant governor of California; to celebrity actors from “Hot in Cleveland” and “The West Wing”; to a slew of fans donating a few dollars here or there, many with fake names that “could have been concocted by comedy writers, or a 12-year-old boy,” as *The New York Times* suggested.¹²² Given how small his typical donations are in comparison to other Super PACs, it is remarkable that ABTT raised over a million dollars, so the FEC filings demonstrated Colbert’s enormous popularity. Equally surprising, FEC

Treasurer Shauna Polk agreed to read Colbert’s statement, saying:

*“Stephen Colbert, President of ABTT, has asked that I quote him as saying, ‘Yeah! How you like me now, F.E.C? I’m rolling seven digits deep! I got 99 problems but a non-connected independent-expenditure only committee ain’t one.’ I would like it noted for the record that I advised Mr. Colbert against including that quote.”*¹²³

Quoted in nearly every major newspaper, Polk’s statement illustrates just how far Colbert has come from being Jon Stewart’s goofy counterpart to becoming a unique pop culture icon, with a

¹²¹ Melissa Bell, “Stephen Colbert Super PAC filings state more than \$1 million raised,” *The Washington Post*, 31 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/stephen-colbert-super-pac-taken-back-from-jon-stewart-video/2012/01/31/gIQAm9vjeQ_blog.html>.

¹²² Sarah Maslin Nir, “Colbert’s Super PAC Raises More than \$1 Million,” *The New York Times*, 31 Jan 2012, 5 May 2012 <<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/colberts-super-pac-raises-more-than-1-million-dollars/>>.

¹²³ Ibid.

foot in entertainment and a foot in politics. Since then, Colbert's Super PAC has continued to enchant audiences with hysterical antics, including selling "Colbert Super PAC Super Fun Packs" for college students to start their own satellite Super PACs.

With plenty of cash on hand and the 2012 presidential election still months away, Colbert is sure to find more ways to use his Super PAC to entertain and enlighten the American public. Indeed, Colbert's Super PAC, ironically, exists to end Super PACs. As Colbert said on his show in February 2012, it is not enough for his name to be synonymous with Super PACS, proclaiming, "I want the Google recognition of a Santorum. I will not be satisfied until Super PAC means, 'a frothy mix of lube and campaign funding that is sometimes the byproduct of politics.'"¹²⁴ All crude humor aside though, in the past year, Colbert has blazed a truly remarkable trail through his use of real life political satire, taking a leading role in campaign finance reform to show the public that this issue is important to America's democracy.

¹²⁴ *The Colbert Report*, Comedy Central, 2 Feb 2012.