

The Art of Political Humor

With Al Franken, Helen Thomas, and Senator Alan Simpson; moderated by Jeff Greenfield

John F. Kennedy Library and Foundation

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DEBORAH LEFF: Good evening to those of you in this room and in the theater watching on closed circuit television. It's quite a good crowd tonight. I'm Deborah Leff; I'm Director of the Kennedy Library. And on behalf of the Library and of John Shattuck, the CEO of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, I welcome you to this evening's forum on political humor. I'd also like to let you know that the forum is co-sponsored by WBUR, Boston.com, *The Boston Globe*, the Boston Foundation, Boston Capital, and the Lowell Institute.

There is of course a reason why the Kennedy Library would have such an affinity for the subject of political humor. Let's take a look. [Long pause.]

[Video clip of humorous moments in Kennedy Administration shown to audience]

[Applause.]

PRES. KENNEDY: I spoke a year ago today to take the inaugural, and I'd like to paraphrase a couple of statements I made that day by saying that we observe tonight not a celebration of freedom, but a victory of the party. We are sworn to pay off the same party debt our forebears ran up nearly a year and three months ago. [Applause.] Our deficit will not be paid off in the next hundred days, nor will it be paid off in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this administration, nor perhaps even in our lifetime on this planet, but let us begin. [Laughter.]

REPORTER: In some quarters, sir, there is a fear that big business is using the stock market slump as a means of forcing you to come to terms with business. One reputable columnist, after talking to businessmen, obviously, reported this week their attitude is "Now we have [you] where they want you." Have you seen any reflection of this attitude?

PRES. KENNEDY: I can't believe I'm where big business wants me. [Laughter.]

REPORTER: It's been said, and I think more than once, that heads of government should not go to the summit to negotiate agreements, but only to approve agreements negotiated at a lower level. Now it's being said and written that you're going to eat those words and go to a summit without any agreement at a lower level. Has your position changed, sir?

PRES. KENNEDY: Well, I'm going to have a dinner for all the people who've written it, and we'll see who eats what. [Laughter.]

REPORTER: Congressman Algier of Texas today criticized Mr. Salinger as a, I quote, "young and inexperienced White House publicity man," end quote [laughter], and questioned the advisability of having him visit the Soviet Union. I wonder if you have any comments.

PRES. KENNEDY: I know there are always some people who feel that the Americans are always young and inexperienced and foreigners are always able and tough and great negotiators, but I don't think that the United States acquired its present position of leadership if that view were correct. Now you also, as I saw the in press, said that Mr. Salinger's main job was to increase my standing in the Gallup Polls. Having done that, he's now moving on-- [Laughter.]

PRES. KENNEDY: -- It was 1952, and I was thinking about running for the United States Senate. I went to then Senator Smathers and said, "George, what do you think?" He said, "Don't do it. You can't win. Bad year." [Laughter.] In 1956 I was at the Democratic Convention, and I said I

didn't know whether I'd run for Vice-President or not, so I said, "George, what do you think?" " This is it. They need a young man. Your chance." So I ran and lost. [Laughter.] And in 1960 I was wondering whether I ought to run in the West Virginia primary. "Don't do it. That state, you can't possibly carry it." And actually, the only time I really got nervous about the whole matter at Los Angeles was just before the balloting George came up and he said "I think it looks pretty good for you." [Laughter.]

End of video clip.]

[Audience applause]

DEBORAH LEFF: I'd like to ask our guest to join us on stage. [Audience applause.] Uncharacteristically on the right we have the even-handed, always temperate author of *Rush Limbaugh is a Big, Fat Idiot*, comedian Al Franken. [Audience applause.] A Harvard graduate, Mr. Franken is probably best known for his work on *Saturday Night Live*. He anchored *Comedy Central's* "Indecision '92" and was pretty good in those performances at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 1994 and 1996.

One of the people who would have been there is the person to Jeff's right, that is Helen Thomas, former White House correspondent for UPI, and the person who closed each White House press conference with the words "Thank you, Mr. President." [Audience applause.] Helen began covering President Kennedy November 1960 and she's covered every president since that time. She's the author of *Thanks for the Memories, Mr. President: Wit and Wisdom in the Front Row of the White House*, and she'll be shamelessly hawking and signing that book after this forum, along with Al Franken, who will be shameless hawking and signing his.

Arriving at the last minute, just to show that Republicans can be funny, Senator Al Simpson is joining us. Senator Simpson did wonderfully in Congress as the U.S. Senator representing Wyoming from 1979 to 1997, including ten years as the Republican Whip and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

And bringing this altogether is our moderator, CNN Senior Analyst Jeff Greenfield. Jeff actually, despite his age, worked for Robert Kennedy, remarkably enough, as what he characterized to me as a junior junior aide, but also a speechwriter. He also worked on the campaign trail, served as a political and media analyst for ABC News where I had the privilege of working with him at *Nightline*. And at CNN you could often see him guest-hosting on *Larry King Live* and moderating town meetings. So Jeff, over to you.

[Audience applause.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: It's great to see so many people out on a night like this, but, you know, it does remind me, whenever I see this many people from Boston gathered on a night in October I realize it's another year the Red Sox aren't in the World Series. [Laughter.] So it's kind of familiar. I wanted to set just a couple of notions, and then have this as a conversation, with many interruptions. Ultimately you'll have your chance at these mics.

I've always thought of humor as the nitroglycerine of politics. It is very powerful; it is very dangerous; it has to be handled with great care. Used correctly, it can change a campaign, as when Franklin Roosevelt in 1944 mockingly defended the honor of his Scotch terrier, Fala, from the imprecations of the Republicans and effectively ended the campaign. Or, as you saw in the hands of a President Kennedy or a President Reagan. This is the Kennedy Library, so we didn't have the clip of Ronald Reagan essentially putting away Walter Mondale in 1984 in that second debate by promising not to criticize his opponent's youth and inexperience. It's a perfect example of political judo. You take what's a weakness, you put a light touch, and you flip it.

On the other hand, I can think of at least two Cabinet members who lost their jobs because of ill-timed quips: one, an obnoxious, racist phrase uttered by Earl Butts, the other a kind of

condescending dismissal of women and minorities on the part of James Watt. There's a governor of Texas who became an ex-governor of Texas-- Clayte Williams, I believe-- by making a mocking reference to rape when he ran against Ann Richards.

And just today I finished John McCain's latest memoir where he tells the story of trying to be lighthearted to a bunch of Arizona college kids his first time out in the Senate. Referring to the senior citizens, he said, "We want you people to vote as often as those people do over in seizure world." Funny line. He spent the next three days apologizing to the considerable senior citizen population of Arizona.

So those are just some preliminary notes. What I want to do now is turn to this panel and talk both about people who employ politics who are in the public life and people who employ humor to talk about people in public life.

And I just want to start up with a couple of short answer questions. Senator Simpson, who was the funniest president you ever heard, of the people you served with?

SEN. AL SIMPSON: Well, Ronald Reagan had the most amazing sense of humor. And whenever Nancy would go off to Scottsdale to visit her father, he would call several of us who loved great tales-- the Dale Bumpers, the Hal Heflin, Taylor from Missouri and we'd go over to the White House and just sit around and tell stories for about three hours. And he loved that. He loved stories. He was very humorous. He had good timing; he loved it.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Who was the least naturally funny president you knew?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, Jimmy Carter was a man who superbly tried and did not achieve in his sense-- and I think it's wonderful--

HELEN THOMSEN: He only won the Nobel. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Huh? Well-- [Audience applause and laughter.] Well, I didn't say that.

JEFF GREENFIELD: It wasn't the Nobel for humor.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: No, no, it wasn't. [Audience laughter.] You're absolutely correct. It kind of threw him off when you came into him with a joke. He didn't like anything off color certainly, and he was--

JEFF GREENFIELD: And that ruled any of your stuff out. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: It took everything out of mine -- there's nothing left for me. That's for sure. [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: But people often cite you and yet I'm not sure if you were there at the time. I know Helen was; I'll ask her: Richard Nixon is not someone who we generally think of as gifted with a rollicking sense of humor. Fair enough?

HELEN THOMAS: Scratch the word rollicking. No, he didn't have a rollicking sense of humor. He had a sense of humor, but it was so acerbic, I think he was afraid to use it in public. It really came across very mean.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Which raises an interesting point.

JEFF GREENFIELD: He loved a good anti-Semitic joke. [Audience laughter.] He really did. You could put "kike" in a joke; Nixon-- [audience laughter] No one enjoyed a good kike joke better than Dick Nixon.

HELEN THOMAS: His was better on the press. He once said that it was only coincidental that we're talking about pollution to his Cabinet when the press walked in.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Yeah. Like I said not a rollicking sense of humor. [Audience laughter.] But one of the things that strikes me, Alan, is that politicians, it seems to me, really love self-deprecating humor, because it's related to "I'm not wearing a top hat, I'm not a big shot." But there are people, some of your former colleagues-- we might even get to them by name-- whose sense of humor, to use Helen's words, is indeed acerbic, who have incredibly funny and pretty sharp things to say about other people.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well that's-- of course they deserve to be punched around. I love that. [Audience laughter.] But Ted Kennedy is the master of self-deprecating humor. No one, I ever worked with is better than Ted. In the midst of all the heat, he can come up with something that just throws everybody off. He's the master.

JEFF GREENFIELD: It seems to me also there are people in the Senate who have a wonderful sense of humor, but we don't know it. They won't let them see it where we don't appreciate it. Or maybe it's because it's cutting. I've always thought that Fritz Hollings has one of the sharpest tongues in the Senate, but it's not self-deprecating. It's other people deprecating.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, when he asked Sam Donaldson about his hairpiece it was pretty bad. You may remember that Donaldson was interviewing and he said-- and he had him set up. He said, "Mr. Hollings, you're from the textile state, I know that, and you promote"-- "Oh yes I do." "And I know that they tell me you get your suits from Hong Kong. Is this true? Do you get your suits from Hong Kong?" And old Fritz sat there. He said, "I get my suits from the same place you get your hairpiece." {Audience laughter.} And Sam went like this at him, [makes face] and that was the end of that.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Well, that's a classic example of a counter-punch. I mean if you get hit first it seems to me that you must return the favor.

HELEN THOMAS: He had to apologize to his mother for his attacks on the press.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, you were after me day and night. That's how I had to throw Helen off. She said, "How do you explain that?" And I said "My mother has already talked to me, Helen." She said, "Uh, how do you get away with that behavior?"

JEFF GREENFIELD: Before I turn to Justice Franken [audience laughter], have you, Senator Simpson, ever had the occasion to say something in public that you regarded as quite funny, and then found yourself having to take back a day or two later?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: I have had my size 15 feet in my mouth more times than anyone could ever imagine. But every time I lost my sense of my humor I got in a lot of trouble-- put it that way. I don't remember any specific thing. I never made racist stories or stories that were intended to hurt others, and so do, you know, "cute" stories about somebody else. All humor is serious. And when you hear a person saying something and then say "Ha ha ha, just kidding," forget it. They were setting the score. And when they say "It's just humor," forget, just ignore that. That's the laughter of the century. So I can remember. You know, all I remember is that when I lost my humor I got clobbered.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Now Alan, one of-- you can take this wherever you want to, and you will-- [audience laughter]-- but one of the things I want to try to link up is that politicians tell set great stories to prove that they have senses of humor. That's why a lot of them go on Imus to prove that by God, they can take a joke, too. And yet we know that there are talented, well known comic writers and comedians who are asked by these politicians to make them funny when they, say, go to a White House correspondents' dinner or go on *Letterman* or *Leno*. You have had this experience of being called-- yes?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yes. Yes, I have.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Okay. I'll do this like a lawyer. [Audience laughter.] And Mr. Franken-- because lawyers know how to do this; three years of law school taught me.

AL FRANKEN: I can't recall every instance... [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: Perhaps this will refresh your memory, Mr. Franken. As someone who has been asked by the people on whose side you find yourself-- your Clintons, your Rodham-Clintons, your Gore-Clintons-- to make them funny--

AL FRANKEN: Yeah? (Laughs.)

JEFF GREENFIELD: Perhaps if he changed his name he'd be President today. Who knows? Does it give you any pause that you are lending your rollicking sense of humor to people to make them look like what they are not-- that is, funny?

AL FRANKEN: No.

JEFF GREENFIELD: How come?

AL FRANKEN: And let me tell you why.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Oh good.

AL FRANKEN: I do get it all the time. I get people who are going to be on *Letterman* or *Leno*-- and they will be Hillary or the Vice-President-- Al, I call him, or people like that. [Audience laughter.] And first of all, what I tell them is, I give this kind of pep talk to anyone I do this for: is that America doesn't want the funniest person in the world to be President. They just want to know that the President or the Senator has a sense of humor. They just want to know you're a human being. So you don't have to go out there and do, something like, characters. You know? You don't have to be Robin Williams on *The Letterman Show*. You don't have to be that funny. You just have to demonstrate that you have a sense of humor.

So that basically means that I become more of a facilitator to find out, figure out what's funny. And both those people, Hillary and the Vice-President, happen to actually be funny people. Whether you believe it or not, it's true. And also, yeah, occasionally I'll write a line, especially if it's the Gridiron Dinner or something, for Daschle I've done and for Gore and for Hillary. But to me that's no more fraudulent person than Michael Gerson-- that's his name, right?-- the President's speech writer, writing the brilliant speech that he gave to the Joint Session of Congress. I mean, why is it okay for President Bush to use a speechwriter and not okay for Al Gore to get a line from some guy like me?

JEFF GREENFIELD: I have an answer to that, since you told me this five minutes ago. And the answer is-- and I think that when people try to read a politician, a public figure, they want to know-- they may know the person's not a great phrase maker, but a sense of humor is considered to be something inherent in your character. Right? Isn't that your point, Helen, that if you meet a politician and you find him humorless, you think what?

HELEN THOMAS: I think that's too bad. I think they really lack something in their character.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Now is that a fair judgment, Alan? Are there not people you've worked with, let's say even in the Senate, elected people, who are gifted, who care mightily about issues, who are incredibly smart. They just don't have a sense of humor?

HELEN THOMAS: They take themselves too seriously.

JEFF GREENFIELD: But maybe they just don't have a sense of humor.

AL FRANKEN: Well, how does this speak to my point?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Because you're infusing... [interrupted]

AL FRANKEN: Does anyone else have that question? [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: You won't in a minute. Because humor, unlike a notion of shaping ideas, is something that people, I think, think is in your character. So you're giving them a character transplant.

AL FRANKEN: No you're not, because you go on *Letterman*, it isn't like Gore is going to do a script that you wrote. He's going to be doing a back and forth with David. If the President has to be funny at the Alfalfa Dinner, at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, at the Radio and TV Correspondents' Dinner, in the spring he has more gigs than Mark Russell. [Audience laughter.] So people write for him. But it isn't like "Oh, well."

HELEN THOMAS: He had the impromptu sense of humor. Kennedy had an impromptu sense of humor. It was not set up, the things I remember. Some parts were so quick--

AL FRANKEN: Some of them, but I'm sure the paraphrasing of his inaugural was written by a speech writer.

HELEN THOMAS: Okay.

JEFF GREENFIELD: But I want to come back to this point. [Audience laughter.] I never did trust a man with a Harvard education, and now I know why.

HELEN THOMAS: Another Ari Fleicher. He's trying to control us. [Audience laughter/applause.]

AL FRANKEN: Did you compare me?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: No, Jeff.

AL FRANKEN: The other Jew. [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: I want to come back to this semi-serious question. Did you work with people-- I mean principals in the Senate-- who were gifted, great public servants, no sense of humor?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yeah, I did, and they were always easy to overpower in debate or any other place. You could just get them. You'd just throw something in. They're all buttoned down, they've got their script in their head, and you just do some absurdity.

AL FRANKEN: We want names.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yeah, I know. [Audience laughter.] Franken and I, what was that show you dragged me into?

AL FRANKEN: Oh, *Lateline*.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: That's where you portrayed me as ...(inaudible) savager of the AARP, and I loved it. Now where were we?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Chuck Grassley.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yes, you can throw them off. Humorless people are easy to throw off. You can really bamboozle them.

JEFF GREENFIELD: How do they get elected though? I mean if we want our politicians to have a sense of humor-- I'll really get you in trouble-- are there some states that require less humor from their public figures than others? [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Everyone has a sense of humor, but when it's contrived it doesn't work.

AL FRANKEN: Indiana. [Audience laughter.] Now Homer Kapart-- not funny. [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: Evan Bayh?

AL FRANKEN: Evan Bayh? Not funny.

HELEN THOMAS: Sometimes they're funny and they don't know it.

AL FRANKEN: Nice guy. Dick Lugar, not funny. Dan Quayle, not funny. I make my point. I prove it. I'm right again. [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: Al may be onto something, because if you throw in Iowa and Illinois-- Dick Durban, Pete Fitzgerald, Tom Harkin, Chuck Grassley-- not funny. Perhaps states that begin with "I" have no sense of humor. What do you think? [Audience laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: Paul Simon.

HELEN THOMAS: Wyoming, very funny.

AL FRANKEN: Funny, funny man, Paul Simon.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well--

AL FRANKEN: The bowtie(?).

JEFF GREENFIELD: Have we stumbled onto a great secret of American politics?

HELEN THOMAS: You've got the formula.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well Helen, she'd see us all in various stages, doing the Gridiron or doing those Press Club things, and the greatest bombers, the people who just cratered, were the people who had a speechwriter telling them to do some kind of humor, one of those--

AL FRANKEN: A bad one.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Just down the pike.

AL FRANKEN: A bad-- yeah.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Because it wasn't natural, it didn't come off natural. Bill Bradley asked me once, he said, "I've got to go give a speech"-- and he and I came in together, wonderful friend-- and he said "I've got to speak to the New Jersey Chamber and they want all humor. Now give me some of your good stuff." So I gave him three choice ones. He came back. He said, "They didn't work." I said, "No, they're not yours." Then I said, "Tell me one that just kills you." And so he started: when he was with the Nicks, and this guy said "going to give you a dog...", something about "But if you don't score at the next game, watch out for your dog," you know, or whatever-- something rather bizarre.

AL FRANKEN: I know the joke. It's a good one, actually. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: No, it was not my joke, it was his, and it knocked 'em dead because it was Bradley being Bradley, telling his story.

AL FRANKEN: Can I tell the joke? It's a funny joke. I heard Bradley tell it.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Tell the joke. Is it yours?

AL FRANKEN: A guy sent him a letter saying, "If you play as badly as you did last-- you know, keep playing this bad, I'll kill your dog." And Bradley wrote him back saying, "I don't have a dog." And the next day he opened up his front door and there was a dog; it was like a gift, a dog. He got a gift, a dog.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I see your point, Alan. It has to be you telling the joke or it's just--

AL FRANKEN: But it's not mine, it's Bradley's. Yeah.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: One of the great natural ones was Dale Bumpers. Bumpers had the most amazing old town, you know, country lawyer's humor-- just blockbuster stuff.

JEFF GREENFIELD: So, in thinking about this, I'm remembering seeing a woodcut in a New York newspaper in the middle of the Civil War, and it goes like this: the figure of Columbia weeping is telling Lincoln: "10,000 dead at Antedum." And Lincoln is saying, "That reminds me of a funny story"-- the point being that he was severely criticized for having a sense of humor and telling stories in the midst of-- I guess particularly in the midst of the Civil War. Which leads me to this not humorous question. We are in a time now that is a whole lot grimmer in a lot of ways than it was, say, two years ago, for all kinds of obvious reasons. Is humor still an effective political tool in a time when economically, militarily, people are much more worried than they were? Can it work? Or do you have to kind of put it on the back burner a little?

HELEN THOMAS: I don't think you have to put it on the back burner if you have a real sense of humor. I don't mean mangling the English language or calling people nicknames because it's supposed to be so funny. It's not funny.

AL FRANKEN: Who does that? [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I want to tell a couple about Kennedy. When I first had the honor of closing a Presidential news conference, it was a Kennedy news conference and Kennedy was-- it was getting time to close it off, and he got wound up in a question. It was very clear he was searching for the answer, kept talking, hoping he'd hit on an answer. And I finally got up and I said, "Thank you, Mr. President." He said, "Thank *you*, Helen." [Audience laughter.]

And once when in 1960, in November on Thanksgiving Day, I covered the M Street House in Georgetown and President Kennedy was naming different members of the Cabinet. But anyway, then he flew off to Palm Beach and Jackie had come to the door with Caroline. And when Kennedy left the scene then we all left. And when I got home about 11 o'clock at night after dinner, I got this call from the office. "Get to Georgetown Hospital because John F. Kennedy, Jr. is about to be born," or something to that. Anyway, the whole press corps converged on Georgetown Hospital. And for ten days-- that's how long they kept a woman after a Caesarian and Jackie was in the hospital for 10 days-- and I was always there, and also Fran Moulin of Associated Press. We were staking out.

Kennedy would come to the hospital twice a day and he would see me, and we'd always try to think of a question we could ask him. And I remember asking Kennedy, "Do you want your son to grow up to be President?" And he said, "I just want him to be healthy." But on the tenth day I was assigned to go back to his M Street House because Kennedy was going to see President Eisenhower to get oriented on what it's like to be a president, and hopefully to be told some of the deep, dark secrets of the nation. So I stood out in front of the house. Kennedy took one look at me and said, "You've deserted my child." [Audience laughter.] He had seen me at the hospital day after day. And this is quick humor, unprepared and right on the mark.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Are there people, Alan, who are afraid to show a sense of humor, who you know have one and they just won't let it out in public because they think it's-- I don't know-- undignified or too dangerous or something?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, you feel vulnerable if nobody laughs and you're trying to be humorous. I had a teacher in grade school; she said "Haven't you figured it out, Alan, whether we're laughing with you or laughing at you?" which is a very interesting thing. And remember: all humor comes from pain. All humor comes from pain. Danny Kaye told me that one. You can ask anyone with a great sense of humor how they got it, and they used it as their sword and their shield. That's how it works.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Okay. I want to turn to the ideologue on the panel. Not you, not you. You. [points to Franklin] Tell me some funny conservatives whose sense of humor you genuinely admire.

AL FRANKEN: Public figures or writers? [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: You can't do it. Okay, Alan, you're conservative?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: I've always flunked the test, because I was always pro-choice, so I flunked the test.

AL FRANKEN: Okay, then rule him out. [Audience laughter.] Too bad. Yeah, I think Bob Dole, very funny man. Bob Dole had-- we were talking about this-- he had what I consider ironic self-distance, which is a horrible thing for a politician to have. Because a really good politician-- Another guy who had this is Bob Kerry. He was always sort of reviewing himself from outside as though looking at the irony of the process. Someone who didn't do that was Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton was always-- you know, what he was saying, he believed, and at all times. [Audience laughter.] You know, he was completely consonant with what he was saying.

I once saw Bob Dole at a Perot conference, and they hated him. This was a Ross Perot conference in '95, and it was the year before he became the nominee. And it was sort of a beauty pageant, you know. All the potential Republican nominees came. And they just-- Bob Dole stood for everything the Perot people hated, and he knew they hated him. And he had a speech, and at one point he says, "Now Bob Dole isn't perfect." And this is in the speech, and I'm reading along the speech. What he injects, because he just didn't like them-- he just went: "Bob Dole isn't perfect. Maybe you people are." [Audience laughter.] And I just went "God bless him," you know? And he just-- he didn't use it to great effect for his own good, but he was really very funny.

I remember something he did in one of the debates where Lehrer cut him off, but really didn't cut him off. So it was like "-- and to buy more food, and more"-- And Lehrer went, "Sir, your time is up," but he covered up food. And then he goes, "So you complete your thought." And he just went, "Food." [Audience laughter.] (Laughs.) Do you remember that moment? It was really, really funny. But he's funny, and Reagan was very funny. Reagan was very funny.

When he got shot, it was like not just one joke, or even like eight jokes. "Well, I hope the surgeons are Republicans." [Audience laughter.] You know, "Tell Mommie I forgot to duck." And it was just like "Boom, boom, boom, boom," and it was--

JEFF GREENFIELD: No, I think that point people have gotten. But there was one line he did-- it may have been scripted-- in his '92 speech at the Convention in New Orleans. He was bidding farewell, and Clinton was the nominee; he'd come back. And he said, "Now, I see some people are talking about this fellow, William Jefferson Clinton, and they're comparing him to Thomas Jefferson." And then reaching back to Lloyd Benson's famous evisceration of Dan Quayle, Reagan says, "Let me tell you something. I knew Thomas Jefferson. [Audience laughter.] Thomas Jefferson was a friend of mine. And Bill Clinton is no Thomas Jefferson."

AL FRANKEN: Now I wrote a riff on that whole thing for Gore, which was-- they used at the Gridiron-- and Gore said, "This is my plan for the first debate. I'm going to throw Bush. I'm going to say something negative about his father, at which point I'm sure he'll defend his father. And at that point I'm going to say, "I knew George Bush. George Bush was a friend of mine, and you, sir, are no George Bush,"-- [audience laughter]-- which I believe will hopelessly confuse Governor Bush. [Audience laughter/applause.] And so that was--

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: You know, considering those debates, he should have taken that route.

AL FRANKEN: He should have done it. He should have done it. [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I once told President Reagan at a news conference that "So who says you're not a good Christian." He said, "I turned the other cheek."

JEFF GREENFIELD: In terms of your work with other senators-- this is a classic small group; in small group theory you've got 100 people, 98 of whom assume they should be President of the United States. Is humor a leavening device when things get tough in a conference committee, when you're down to the short stroke, so to speak, when it's the end of session, when things are really tough, is humor something that most of you folks use to just kind of smooth the troubled waters?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: It always works, and one of the best ones in conference committee was Mo Udall. And of course Mo wrote a book, *Too Funny to Be President*. But remember that Mo Udall, if he'd had about, I think, 30,000 more votes in about four other primaries, would have been the candidate for President instead of Jimmy Carter. And it was his humor that he insisted that brought him down. He told the barbershop joke, you know, the one, he goes into the barbershop in New Hampshire, said, "I'm Mo Udall and I'm running for President." And they all say, "Yeah, we were just laughing about that a few minutes ago." [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: John McCain devotes a whole chapter in his book to Mo Udall. Two stories that he quotes from Mo Udall, one of which may perhaps be a little, oh, risqué for this crowd. But since John McCain told it in public, I figure I can. The first one was that when Udall ran for a position in the House leadership and he lost, he got up and he said "I'd like to thank the 130 Democratic Congressmen who pledged themselves to vote for me and the 60 who voted for me." And then he said, "I have now learned the difference, coming from Arizona, between a cactus and a caucus. In a cactus all the pricks are on the outside." [Audience laughter/applause.] Now this is me quoting John McCain quoting Mo Udall, so if any of you have any problems [trails off]...

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, he came out after a loss-- maybe it was the presidency-- and he was very gracious. He told a few stories and he said, "But let's not focus on that, I want my supporters to know, everyone should join together. The voters have spoken, the bastards." [Audience laughter.] That was Mo Udall.

JEFF GREENFIELD: You know, I'm still trying to trace the providence of that, not to take anything away from Udall, who's one of the funniest ever in public life. But Dick Tuck said that Kennedy at a concession speech when he ran for State Senate, years before that, and I'll bet-- I don't know-- maybe Horace-- no, Horace Greeley died before the election. It couldn't have been him. I wonder how far back that goes. But Udall, there's a guy whose sense of humor was always present. He's also the guy-- I'm sorry to admit, who got up at one of these endless political dinners-- I bet everybody's quoted that since-- and he said after endless speeches, "Everything that can possibly be said has been said. It's just that not everyone has yet said it." [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: He also said that "Anyone that thinks of running for President, you never get it out of your system except with embalming fluid." [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: In an age when so many of these candidates-- and I know this is going to sound like, you know, everything was better in the old days, and I don't mean that, because politics was dirtier and more corrupt in the old days-- but in an age when you can turn on a Senate floor debate or a political rally and everybody comes out looking exactly the same, with the same hair and the same ties and the same suits and the same set of consultants who have told them to say the same whinny words, is political humor in some sense an endangered species, in the sense that you guys mean it, of the natural willingness to express yourself in your own words? Do you see that at all, that these guys are not willing to be as natural as they once were?

HELEN THOMAS: I haven't heard anything funny lately.

AL FRANKEN: Then you haven't been listening to Chuck Grassley. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: What Al is saying, though, one of the sad things-- and I was one of the gray beards helping Bob Dole in his campaign-- the saddest thing was he had advisers that were telling him to dampen down his sense of humor and not use his sense of humor, which made Bob Dole totally uncomfortable. He didn't come through in the campaign, and it was a shame. And he believed these ...(inaudible) around him.

HELEN THOMAS: They were afraid he was going to accuse Democrats of starting two world wars again.

JEFF GREENFIELD: But why would a guy who has achieved what Bob Dole achieved, you know, one of the most beloved leaders of the Senate of any, I think, in this century-- probably would have won a closed, secret vote for President, including half the Democrats, if they could have voted--

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: They had one time, and he got 90 votes of something.

JEFF GREENFIELD: But why would he listen to those people?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: He wanted to win, and they told him that was the way to do it, I guess.

HELEN THOMAS: He complimented me on the gown I was wearing and said it came from J. Edgar Hoover's wardrobe. [Audience laughter/applause.]

AL FRANKEN: I remember in Iowa at some debate, some little girl asked a question. And he said something. And remember that Phil Graham, at one point-- maybe this was in actually-- Graham ran '96, that's right. And Graham uses the "Ah flunked the third, seventh, and ninth grade." [Audience laughter.] And so some girl got up. You know, it was one of these forums they were at where school children asked questions. And the little girl asked a question about education, and he said "Now what grade are you in?" She said, "Well, I'm in third grade." And he says, "Well, Phil flunked that," you know. [Audience laughter.] Or "No wonder you can't answer that, Phil. You flunked that grade." It was something like that, and it got a laugh-- right? But I remember, like-- Oh, shoot, the political analyst, Bill Schneider.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Bill Schneider, CNN political analyst.

AL FRANKEN: Yeah-- after the debate going, like, you know, "Did that play too rough? Some people might think so. Some people might say 'That's Bob Dole's sense of humor,' and that's good. Other people might think it was too harsh." And I'm sure Bob Dole's like watching this, you know, in his hotel room, going like, "Ah, I better tone it down." [Audience laughter.] (Laughs.) "Ah, shoot. Okay."

JEFF GREENFIELD: I actually remember the guy who I actually think of in the Senate as having-- I don't want to use the word mean, because that's too pejorative, but let's say acerbic: Mr. Hollings of South Carolina. In 1984 he was a very long shot candidate for President, as was

Rubin Askew, the Governor of Florida. And Rubin Askew had this unfortunate tic; he would do this. And it's amazing. The man was one of the most beloved public figures in Florida, a great senator, as honest as the day was long. But he did have this thing he did.

And at one point-- I don't know; these were not exactly the two front runners-- but Askew said something critical of Hollings' position on something. And Hollings, who, as you may remember, is the absolute living embodiment of Foghorn Leghorn, Senator Claghorn he was just a great...

AL FRANKEN: "Ah say, sir"--

JEFF GREENFIELD: "Ah say, boy, ah say"-- And Hollings turns to him in a debate and says, "That's not what ah said, Rubin. You've got a tic in your ear, too." [Audience laughter.] And I remember, you know, watching this and thinking, you know, I could see doing that in a closed meeting in the U.S.-- This is a televised debate, you know? People see this. So I guess that's one case of a guy who--

AL FRANKEN: Hollings lost the crucial Tourettes vote. [Audience laughter.] I remember that. That was--

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Up in New Hampshire they've got a lot of those. They ...(inaudible).

HELEN THOMAS: In the one-upsman department, Everett Dirksen got his first limousine car when he became a leader. And he called LBJ, who was also in his limousine, and he said, "Lyndon, you know where I'm calling you from?" And Johnson said, "Wait a minute till I get my other phone." [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: You know, in about five minutes we're going to—You know, if any of you are foolish enough to have a question for these people-- But we have mics there and there. That it, two mics? Comedy's not that good. They used to have four mics.

But I want to wrap up our part of this with a question that I've actually sort of been bothered about humor. And it's not so much the humor of politicians, but it's the humor directed at politicians, and particularly here by late 1980's. And I have this notion-- I'd like to know what you think about it-- that because of the nature of late night political humor-- whether it's Leno or Letterman or Conan -- they seize upon the most notable negative trait of whoever they're talking about and they hammer it home night after night, because that's what an audience that is not particularly politically hip will get. And these guys are defined solely by that trait.

In other words, Al Gore: boring, a robot. George W. Bush: an idiot. Bob Dole: senile old man. Bill Clinton: we don't even have to get into that. [Audience laughter.] And the question is, is there some unfortunate effect of that in which we've taught a couple of generations that none of these guys are anything but fools, naives, idiots, corndogs, or whatever?

HELEN THOMAS: You want to put these late night comedians out of business?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Perish the thought. I'm simply raising the question: does it have an impact on people's willingness to believe political leaders when they're told night after night that they're a bunch of schmucks? [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I think it has a big impact. I think it was relentless on Clinton ...(inaudible). Eight years, he never knew one moment when he wasn't being ridiculed and investigated.

AL FRANKEN: That wasn't solely the fault of late night comedy. [Audience laughter/applause.]

HELEN THOMAS: No. It wasn't solely his fault.

AL FRANKEN: The Conan investigations were a very minor part of it, I thought.

HELEN THOMAS: But it also was relentless. It never ended-- from the moment he stepped into the White House till he left.

AL FRANKEN: But, I mean, it was also-- let's face it-- the news business, too. I mean during the Monica thing it was 24/7 Monica. There were some news organizations that did not succumb to that temptation. I like to thank them wherever I go. *Sailing Magazine* [audience laughter], *American Grocer Monthly* [audience laughter], *Jugs*, and *Big Butt*. Which is ironic, because I thought *Big Butt* had a story.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Thank you. [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I think ...(inaudible) this business. It depends on what it means.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Alan, I'm going to drag this back to semi-serious and ask you: I mean is it harder for anyone to take these political leaders semi-seriously when they're being told in the most watched forums, where we're told a lot of people get their politics from, that there's nothing about them to be taken seriously?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, look-- to counterpoint Helen-- look what they did to Dan Quayle day and night. And the day he put "potatoe" up on the board, the media was standing right there, and it took them a half a day to find that the word was spelled wrong. And when they did they just went goofy. I mean really, the thing was on the board, and they were sitting there, and for three hours, this sat on the board. And then they "potatoed" him into eternity. But I tell people-- and I really mean it-- you can't hate politicians and love democracy. Better get it sorted out. You cannot hate politicians and love democracy. It doesn't work that way. You can be as funny as you want.

HELEN THOMAS: It isn't a question of hating them. It's a question of questioning them.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Oh no, no. There's a lot of disgust, you know, that they're silly, stupid and all. I mean you have to admit that. And I always say to the media, "How would you feel if this were happening to you?" And if you ever see the media people shrivel--

HELEN THOMAS: They wouldn't become politicians.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: -- Shrivel like a bunch of slugs with salt on them, it's when you say "How would you feel if this was happening to you?" Like staking out your house, making fun of you day and night? And you ask that of a journalist and they'll say "That's not a fair question."

HELEN THOMAS: ...You go after public life, you're on camera. So why not?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: More people know Helen Thomas than know 400 people in the U.S. Congress. That's the way it works. So you can't have that isolation--

JEFF GREENFIELD: She's been around a lot longer. [Laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: I actually agree with Alan to some-- I hate you too. [Audience laughter.] (Laughs.) But on the Quayle thing-- I will say one thing-- if Pat Moynihan had misspelled potato, it wouldn't have stuck, you know? I mean it was sort of like Dan Quayle got unfairly labeled as not the brightest guy right out of the gate. It kind of stuck for a reason.

JEFF GREENFIELD: It's true. It's like when-- Al Gore's little fibs. And that's true. Because think about it. If Jimmy Carter had had oral sex with an intern in the Oval Office, nobody would have noticed that. [Audience/panel laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: I guess I can't wrap my head around that even. [Audience/panel laughter.] Wouldn't it be funny if he just had, like with JFK?

JEFF GREENFIELD: I want to endorse Alan Simpson's point about journalists with a quote from Edward R. Murrow; we love to quote Edward R. Murrow about high and noble things. Edward R. Murrow is the guy who said: "Journalists don't have thin skins. They have no skins." And I think, and if you want to hear-- and that's what I've been doing for a lot of my life-- if you want to hear people holler-- they don't holler, squeal—sorry, I'm not a farm guy-- like a stuck pig, you just put journalists on the same griddle. And I think Alan's right. Public life? Do the people know Sherwood Bullard or do they know Dan Rather? Do you think they stop Larry Craig on the street-- Senator from Idaho-- and ask for his autograph as much as they do, say, Brokaw or Jennings or Koppel?

AL FRANKEN: Bullard's a great Republican. [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: So I do think there's a point there.

AL FRANKEN: Dan Rather, never heard of him. [Audience laughter.] Sorry. Keep going. Don't mind me.

JEFF GREENFIELD: No, I'm just seeing the other side of involuntary civil commitment, you know. [Audience laughter.] In law school I had a whole different view. If you've got some questions, please come to the mic. But please, since Helen alluded to Clinton's famous notion of definitions, a question is not a 30 minute speech followed by "Don't you agree?" Okay? [Audience applause.] We've got time for some time, so, what's your question, sir?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you give us two instances in which politicians or separate incidents had equivalent humor, but were perceived differently, and so the outcome was phenomenally different? I ask this primarily because I'm studying Communications and Rhetoric at Emerson College, and when I work on campaigns I really try to ask the candidates that I work for to sort of push the envelope in their communication. Because it's in a good speech that one is attracted to the politician, and I feel that politicians are concerned that they'll be misperceived. So could you give us an example of that?

JEFF GREENFIELD: I actually have a possible one, but I'm the moderator. Have you got an example, anybody?

AL FRANKEN: I'm not totally sure I understand.

Helen Thomas: Well, I think the question is where two people were actually on kind of the same level substantively or even had a kind of equivalent humor, but one of them managed to convey it and the other we got a sense that he was just not there.

AL FRANKEN: No.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Well, please, look--

AL FRANKEN: Jeff, Jeff.. (Laughs.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You have politics: liberal bias, conservative bias.

JEFF GREENFIELD: One of the examples that I can think of-- which probably won't satisfy you, but frankly at this point I don't care [audience laughter]-- is that if you think about the 1960 primary between Kennedy and Humphrey, Humphrey had a pretty good sense of humor. But Humphrey's humor was intense, you know what I mean? It was like he was a very ebullient guy, and Kennedy was a very cool guy. And I don't think anybody would have thought at the end of that that Humphrey had anything like a sense of humor because Kennedy's coolness, that kind of detachment, a little bit of the irony you were talking about, came through.

[simultaneous conversation]

AL FRANKEN: Kind of Cary Grant vs. Jimmy Cagney.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Okay. I like that. That's great. That's great. That's perfect. You're done for the day. Take the rest of the day off. [Audience laughter.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Just a question: do you think this is uniquely American? I mean, like do Danish politicians yuck it up, or is it just something that we sort of express?

AL FRANKEN: I don't know. [Audience/panel laughter.] I know that they have political satire. Especially they like puppets a lot. [Audience laughter] No, they do. They have these latex images of their politicians.

JEFF GREENFIELD: You mean Spitting Image?

AL FRANKEN: Spitting Image in Britain, but they have one in the Soviet Union or, well, the former Soviet Union that was so popular that I think they killed many of the people who [audience laughter] (laughs) did it. And I think there's one in France.

JEFF GREENFIELD: But here is something, I think, that's linked up to a very big American tradition, and that is this country was born in rebellion against authority. And the tradition of making fun of politicians, while it may have hit kind of a critical mass, there's a fellow, Josh Billings, who wrote *The Nineteenth Century*. Artemis Ward wrote a piece on Abe Lincoln getting the nomination for President in 1860 that you could have written today. It's about these guys going to his farm in Illinois, telling him he's been nominated for President, and Artemis was making fun of Lincoln's image as a rail splitter; he was a corporate lawyer. And it has Lincoln sitting there cutting. He said, "Look, I made a promise; I've got to split 3,000,000 rails before sundown. Don't bother me with this presidential stuff."

It's a very deep-seated tradition here. I think I wouldn't say unique, but it is kind of different than any other place. We just love it. I mean read Mark Twain on politicians. And who was it? Was it Artemis Ward that said, "I'm not a politician, and my other habits are good"? This is 150 years ago.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In the wake of 9-11, political satire and political humor kind of took a back seat, maybe rightly so. And then there was the controversy with *Politically Incorrect* and Bill Maher, and I'm wondering if the four could kind of comment on that, whether that was justified.

AL FRANKEN: Okay. A couple things. I'll go right through *Politically Incorrect*. Bill Maher-- people know what we're talking about, right? He had this show, *Politically Incorrect*, which is now off the air, mainly somewhat because of this, but I don't think totally. I know a little bit more about that. When *Politically Incorrect* went on the air several years ago-- it went on ABC-- it was brought on by an executive who left ABC a month later. And Bill really had no champions at ABC, and Koppel didn't like the idea that he was following *Nightline* and the ABC News Department didn't particularly like it.

About a week after 9-11 he had his first show, and they were talking about the concept of whether the terrorists, the hijackers on those planes were cowardly. And so-- and I think Nash de Souza, a conservative commentator, may have said, "Well, you know, I mean, they were courageous enough to die," or something. But Bill said something about "Well, sending a cruise missile from 2,000 miles to hit a target, that's cowardly." Okay. So what he was referring to was, he made it sound like what he was saying was our pilots who sent missiles from 2,000 miles to bomb targets in Kosovo or somewhere, or probably, I guess, during the-- if it's cruise missiles-- must have meant Persian Gulf.

Now I don't think he put it right, but I think he was saying is, like in Kosovo we were dropping bombs from 30,000 feet. And we were killing innocent civilians because we were not willing to take casualties. That was not cowardice on behalf of our pilots. That was President Clinton knowing that the American people were not willing to take casualties in Kosovo.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: And it wasn't even said funny. And by the way, what Bill Maher said inartfully and with a wrinkle that close to kind of just dumb, was basically the criticism of Clinton that say, John McCain has repeatedly made.

AL FRANKEN: Well I don't know if he was criticizing Clinton. It sounded like he was criticizing pilots. But let me say a couple things, one of which was, people did not want to hear that kind of thing from a comedian then. Very ill timed. But I think the sentiment behind it, the point of that show, *Politically Incorrect*, was to be able to say things like that. And it was just at a very sensitive time. And I think there was no reservoir of good will toward Bill, for a number of reasons, at ABC at that point. So they let him hang there.

But I went to Kosovo; I did a USO tour the next month; It was a few weeks later. And I said something that I think is-- I said this to the troops there. I said, "You know, when you were fighting here in Kosovo, the American people were really worried about taking any casualties here. And as a result we had to be very circumspect about how we conducted the war. You'll be happy to know that since 9-11, Americans are willing to take casualties here in Kosovo." And they thought that was hysterical. They laughed. But I was actually speaking to the same point, and it was really poorly put.

But the fact of the matter is, 9-11 changed so much. And one of the things it did change was the willingness of the American people to send ground troops into Afghanistan. You know, President Clinton is criticized a lot for not going and getting Bin Laden. Well, the way to get Bin Laden was the way we went and got Bin Laden, although we didn't necessarily get him, but we may have gotten him. But the way to get him is you had to attack Afghanistan. And we're only willing to do that because we took 3,000 casualties on 9-11.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've always been curious as to which demographics do you guys believe, I guess, are most responsive to political humor and which are the least responsive to political humor. Like which groups of demographics are the funniest?

AL FRANKEN: Which demographics are most receptive to political humor and which are the least?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Alan, from your experience as a practicing politician, is there any demographic group that is less willing to hear humor; they all like humor?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: You either like it or you don't. It doesn't matter where you're from or what country or whatever. It's humor. The Russians have great humor, your very earthy people. I've been there about seven times. I love it. I wish I could speak it, because they speak my kind of earth. It's right down in there. I think that's a stereotype that would be very unfortunate to try to even explain to anyone.

But that young man deserves a better answer, at least one. You asked about perception. Let me tell you: in politics, you're entitled to be called a fool, boob, screwball, idiot, bonehead. All that is fair, but never let them destroy who you are. And when you do, you're gone. And I had a rule, and it was a tough one: an attack unanswered is an attack believed. Furthermore, an attack unanswered, Bob Squires told me is an attack agreed to. And the people who are telling you not to respond are the people who love you the most: your wife, your father, your mother, your children. And you wake up at 2:00 in the morning and you say, "Wait a minute! That's my name. That's me that they're distorting." And never let it happen. And I've watched great politicians go

right down the tubes because their staff and everyone around them was saying, "No one will believe that." Well ladies and gentlemen, they will believe anything-- anything. [Audience laughter/applause.]

HELEN THOMAS: I do think there are certain audiences, and certainly in the east, that are more au courant to humor, to the kind of political humor that's going on. I mean I know everyone-- it's saturation bombing across the country. But I honestly think that, I mean to read Maureen Dowd, you will have to have read many things to catch the humor.

AL FRANKEN: And in contrast, people like in Wyoming are just idiots. [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I don't think that's funny.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Al is a smart ass, and I told him that a long, long time ago. Grade A smart ass.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I was about to point out that Dale Bumpers, cited by former Senator Simpson as one of the funniest men, ran in that au currant state of Arkansas. And as far as I know, telling funny tales in rural America is one of the oldest political traditions there is. I think you go back to a gentleman named Davie Crockett.

HELEN THOMAS: I didn't mean that. I mean for the au currant, what's happening actually on the front and so forth.

JEFF GREENFIELD: On the other hand, don't try to be funny politically to a Japanese audience. [Panel laughter.] I did it once. It's a very big mistake.

HELEN THOMAS: Or to the ...(inaudible).

JEFF GREENFIELD: It's a very big mistake. I don't care what they tell you to go to Tokyo and give a political talk, don't be funny. I don't care what translator you have, I don't care. Don't do it. Russians, fine. I don't know from the Chinese.

AL FRANKEN: If you compare their Prime Minister to Godzilla, they just howl. [Audience laughter.] "Wooh! Ohh-- ohh." They love it. [Audience laughter.] Next time, next time.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Good point. Next time you write my material.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. I wanted to hear from all of the guests today: who are your favorite contemporary political commentators or humorists, whether it's a columnist or someone on broadcast, who gets it right, who doesn't necessarily say, "They're all a bunch of boobs," and has some insight to it?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Good question. And they can be either like practicing politicians or writers? Can we do it that broadly? Okay, Alan who makes you laugh?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Mark Russell. Mark Russell has a gentle touch with his piano, and yet is an equal opportunity offender [audience laughter] with regard to not being that hard or that harsh. But how can the American people not have a view of politicians when all the night shows are just making fun of them right and left: they're all boobs or idiots, and it's a curious thing. Remember when Bill Clinton and Hillary had to go to the media and say to them, "Quit making fun of Chelsea," and they had little things on *Saturday Night Live* with buck teeth and all that? I mean that isn't humor. That is crude stuff. And they can't seem to sort it out.

Humor is not humor if it's just making fun of somebody else. If you're just making fun of somebody else, you're covering a lot of your own butt. That is not humor. People don't laugh at it very much. They laugh, but it isn't down here. It's a kind of a "huh"-- yeah, "ho, ho, ha, ha," like "I

better laugh. The meter is on; the laugh meter is on." So that's where I come from. I made a lot of mistakes, but that's not humor when you're just chopping somebody's shorts off and laughing.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Who makes you laugh? You said Maureen Dowd.

HELEN THOMAS: Well, I think she's very funny there, but Sam Donaldson. And he makes me laugh, with all due respect. And I hate to do it, but I'll second what he said about Mark Russell. I think he's good.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Now I'm going to cite somebody who got into a little bit of au courant temps with former Senator Simpson on our air a couple of years ago, but I do think that the political humor on Jon Stewart's show is of a particularly superior nature, [audience applause] because he doesn't do the obvious joke. He doesn't go for the, you know, "Oh, George Bush, blah blah blah." It's down here. And the people who work with him, his whole troop really gets it. And Alan, you'll be happy to know that they make as much fun of network TV correspondent types as they do-- more than they do about politicians, which is also great.

Now, you know, Barney Frank was supposed to be here; couldn't make it. I think Barney Frank is legitimately one of the funniest people that there is. [Audience applause.] He has a great delivery that kind of-- that semi-lisp he has makes him sound funnier even than his material is.

AL FRANKEN: That's because he's gay. No, no, he is not. [Audience laughter.] No, no, I heard it...

JEFF GREENFIELD: You know, I was going to offer you a quip of his. He wrote a letter to *The New York Times* in 1964 when Strom Thurman flipped to the Republican Party officially, and he said, "We Democrats should always remember: it is better to give than to receive." [Audience laughter.] Many of you know, in his first campaign for office-- local office-- there was a picture of Barney in shirtsleeve, you know, just a complete mess. Chinos wrinkled, kind of, sort of. And the slogan was "Neatness isn't everything." [Audience laughter.] This is a guy who can laugh at himself.

AL FRANKEN: He once said that he's only voted for a politician once that believed everything he believed, and that was himself the first time he ran. (Laughs.) [Audience laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: Who makes you laugh beside yourself?

AL FRANKEN: I like Calvin Trilling a lot. I think he's a treasure. I like Michael Moore. I don't agree with him on everything [audience applause], but I think-- I haven't seen the new film either, but I hear it's really good. You know, I do think that he deals in polemics and I think he's unfair sometimes, but I think he's really funny sometimes, too.

I like *The Daily Show* a lot. I like-- boy, who else?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Chris Buckley?

AL FRANKEN: Chris Buckley? I like him.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I haven't read his new novel, but if you want to laugh your head and other body parts off, read *The White House Mess*, this fictional memoir that he wrote about 10 or 12 years ago.

AL FRANKEN: Garrison Keelor, who sometimes does-- sorry to interrupt you. *White House Mess* is a great thing, and I think another very funny book is by P.J. O'Rourke, you know. I think it wears a little thin.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Now before your next question, I'm going to throw you a curve ball. One of the funniest political novels I ever read-- and no, it's not the one I wrote, fine as that is-- is a novel

called *The Floating Island*, by a guy named Garrett something... It did so badly he gave up writing and now teaches law. It is set in the last days of the Carter administration. I don't know where you can find it. It's one of the funniest political novels I have ever read. Now we're not talking about the Brits or the foreigners, because we're talking only American. I'm telling you, that novel just put me away, and it sold about 800 copies. And now we're going to go to more questions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: After 9-11 this on-line newspaper, *The Onion*-- I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with it--

AL FRANKEN: Right, very familiar. Great. *The Onion* always makes you laugh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Good, someone is. After 9-11 it ran this issue; I don't want to say what it was called here, you know, to this fine audience. But I want to know from each of you, how do you think they handled the events of 9-11? Do you think they did it in a good way, or was it just, you know, a little too harsh?

JEFF GREENFIELD: If I got it-- and I apologize-- the way *The Onion* handled 9-11 was the single most brilliant thing I saw. They stayed an extra week. *The Onion* is a satirical weekly newspaper. They are hilarious. They did a piece on Al Gore campaigning in Pennsylvania-- this is a satirical paper-- and the headline was about Al Gore when he went to Pennsylvania saying, "This is the pestilential hell hole of earth. I don't care if I lose all of your votes if I never have to set foot in this repelling, disgusting state populated by sub-human creatures-- I will be happy."

Anyway, after 9-11, they waited a week and their headline was "Hijackers Surprised to Find Themselves in Hell." [Audience laughter.] I thought they did a brilliant job.

AL FRANKEN: Yeah. The thing you're referring to is the headline which was like-- I mean I'm going to say it-- it was like "Holy Fucking Shit" was the thing, or something like that.

JEFF GREENFIELD: That was the headline on the "Man Lands on the Moon," actually.

AL FRANKEN: But yeah, they're great, and I thought what they did was a great contribution. And I thought Letterman's was putting his foot in the water. You know, I was actually down at Ground Zero, like, a week after, and one of the firefighters there went, like, "When are they going to start doing, like, *Letterman* and stuff." (Laughs.) This [being] a guy who lost four or five guys.

JEFF GREENFIELD: People did say after 9-11 that it was the end of irony; and it was the end of irony for about two-and-a-half weeks.

AL FRANKEN: The guy who said that actually was being ironic.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: To protect the American people, John Ashcroft has been draping dirty statues in government buildings. And my question is, how long do you think it will be before he starts draping raw granite or trees that are growing to keep us protected?

AL FRANKEN: Well, you're referring to this great thing he did, which was-- what is it?-- Lady Justice or something? It's this weird thing. He's weird. [Audience laughter.] I mean there's just no way-- [Audience applause.]

HELEN THOMAS: I don't think he should ever go to Rome. [Audience laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: If he went to Rome he'd have just a permanent erection, I think. [Audience laughter.] So he gives these press conferences-- right?-- from the Justice Department. And the camera position was such that in the shot there is Lady Justice, who has one bare breast-- right?-- in the statue. So he spends, I believe, \$8,000 to drape Lady Justice so that we can't see her breast in the camera shot during his press conference.

JEFF GREENFIELD: And if Clinton was there they would have bared the other breast. So what's the big deal? [Audience laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: Why not say "Let's move the camera"? [Audience laughter.] "Let's move the camera over here so that we don't see the bare breast, and spend the \$8,000 on *A COMPUTER, YOU ASSHOLE!*" Their computers at the FBI can't do a Google search. [Audience laughter.] They can't do two words. To do "Al Qaeda," they have to do "Al." They come up with me, Al Gore; they have to go through-- [audience laughter]-- they have to do every weird Al Yankovich song. Well, fuck, you know? If you're in the FBI and you just want to, at lunch, for your own thing, want to look up "hot, wet, Asian girls," [audience laughter] you've got to go through "hot," "wet," "Asian," "girls." It's just crazy. (Laughs.)

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Alan, I'm going to cut through some of that. And he accuses me of getting down in there? Gee.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I'd like to go back to the first part of that multi-part answer: is John Ashcroft weird? You served with him.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: I served with him. He seemed like, rather rigid, kind of. [Audience/panel laughter.]

JEFF GREENFIELD: He doesn't have to go it alone; save yourself a whole lot of money. [Audience/panel laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: At least I'm trying to use English. He was very much who he was. He had very strong feelings about abortion. There's nothing wrong with that. I don't happen to agree with those feelings. But I don't know how you can continue to make fun of a guy that has his own principles. What the hell's wrong with that?

AL FRANKEN: Well, because--

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: And then he joins the singer's battalion there and he was one of the four Singing Senators-- and I can't remember what part he sang. But I happen to even believe that-- let's get right to it-- that partial birth abortion is something I don't need to handle. That's for doctors. So I've been called a baby killer. He was absolutely appalled when I voted to say "I think that procedure should be done by doctors and shouldn't even be in a legislative body." And he just-- he got teary. And to watch him, then he went on. He has a demeanor which is a scowl, and he knows that. I've heard him say, "You know, I could smile a lot." To take an art deco figure of justice and drape it was absurd. But, you know, again, back to perception. Didn't matter how smart he is. They're going to just use that one on him now for the rest of his eternity, like "potato" with--, or Clinton with Monica, and all of that stuff.

HELEN THOMAS: Well, we got a lot more on him than that. [Audience/panel laughter.] [Audience applause.] Wire tapping, accessing e-mails, massive deportations, picking up people off the street if they have dark skin. Come on. [Audience applause.]

AL FRANKEN: How about the anointing himself with Crisco? [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Hey, you know, it might be--

AL FRANKEN: I mean, you know, what you said was, "How can you make fun of someone who's principled?"

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yeah.

AL FRANKEN: Well, come on. You know if principle includes draping a breast--

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Well, that's one issue. You know, you've got one, you've got a hook now, and you're going to play with that hook for the rest of his days.

AL FRANKEN: Yeah. Well, I was asked about that.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Hook 'em in; see how much fun you can make of another human being. How much fun is that?

HELEN THOMAS: I think the people who flunked his confirmation are great. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: How would you feel if that were happening to you, Al?

JEFF GREENFIELD: We've taken this man over the coals.

AL FRANKEN: No, no, it's very legitimate. That's a very legitimate thing, because just like journalists are thin-skinned, comedians can be thin-skinned, too. And I'm not.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: No!

AL FRANKEN: But many of them are. (Laughs.)

JEFF GREENFIELD: When you were busted-- When you got arrested for exposing yourself in Penn Station you handled that pretty well.

AL FRANKEN: Yeah. Oh God, I went right out.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm from Connecticut. I teach high school politics, and I've got a couple students with me here today. My question to you is: sometimes I feel like I have spoken above students. Is there any time-- some classes-- Is there any time in your, like, election 2000, that evening, that you felt like you were out of comedy or speaking above people at a time?

AL FRANKEN: Are you talking to me? Because comedy, you mentioned comedy. [Audience laughter.] Yeah. I mean all the time. I try to do, you know-- You're talking about the late night comics and especially Leno and Letterman, and they're working to a broad, general audience who mainly it's-- the amount of political ignorance in this country is staggering. The amount of ignorance is staggering. [Audience laughter.] You know, it's like 50 percent of college students can't find the United States on a globe. It's that bad, you know? So you can hardly blame Leno for doing a joke where it's the one thing you know about a politician.

So yeah, where I'm working all the time I try to find an audience that-- it's nice when an audience, like, comes to see me, because then they're expecting-- they're usually a little bit more literate in politics. But then when you're on TV, I do Leno and Letterman and Conan all the time, and you have to be very, very smart about your references and you have to sort of educate people sometimes to a joke as you do it. But everyone knows certain things. You know: Strom Thurman is old, you know? They know a certain set of things, and then you build on that. (Laughs.) You know. But yeah, it's something I think about all the time.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: You're never going to hear Jay Leno say "Did you see that mock-up out of the Conference Committee from Etheria? I mean did you see it?" Doesn't happen.

AL FRANKEN: Oh, I have a good one on that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm a teacher also. However, I teach seventh grade, and I wish my kids were here too, except some of you are here. But I sort of would like to know what, particularly you, Mr. Franken, you were like as a seventh grader. [Audience laughter.]

AL FRANKEN: I, as a seventh grader? This might be hard to imagine: that I had some difficulty with some teachers. [Audience laughter.] But on the other hand, I had teachers who really liked

me and we would just sometimes joke between each other about the other kids. [Audience laughter.] (Laughs.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hopefully I can take all of you back a few years in terms of television, back to the days when television was pretty much in its infancy in terms of its use towards generating political discussion. You might recall during prime time sometime around the mid-'60's there was a show called *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in*. And there was a particular personality that appeared on the show. I remember first encountering him under the Pat Paulsen for President logo. Here you had a comedian who was making a scene and creating some stir among the populace, including people as young as myself at the time, who were led to believe that perhaps Pat Paulsen would be a serious candidate.

I'm not sure which election this was, but I do recall. And children around me were saying, you know, "Is Pat Paulsen running for President?"

JEFF GREENFIELD: Do we remember when Pat Paulsen ran for President?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah.

JEFF GREENFIELD: And our reactions to it?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Pat Paulsen ran for President as a smart comedian: a comedian in prime time who had enough qualms about pulling no holds barred comments about the various candidates running for president.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I mean, it was a joke. [Audience/panel laughter.] He was a *Smothers Brothers* figure who ran for President in 1960 and then, very sadly, kept running. He didn't know that his 15 minutes were over. Pat Paulsen was out there-- remember that, Alan?-- he was out there for [simultaneous conversation] campaign and it wasn't funny anymore.

HELEN THOMAS: How about Harold Stassen?

JEFF GREENFIELD: Harold Stassen? Yes, he and Pat Paulsen also--

AL FRANKEN: That's funnier.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Yes, that did happen. And *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was a kind of a very unusual moment in that a major network in prime time on a Sunday night put people on with a very pronounced political view. And ultimately it proved to be impossible. I mean the tension between CBS and *The Smothers Brothers* when they wanted to do things like salute war protestors and celebrate marijuana and--

AL FRANKEN: Put Pete Seeger on.

JEFF GREENFIELD: -- Put Pete Seeger on singing "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." One of the great things about cable is that it does provide a niche where you don't have suits in New York towers saying "We can't do that." You know, Jon Stewart could not survive on a broadcast network. Jon Stewart would be canceled in six weeks. But he's on *Comedy Central* and it works.

JEFF GREENFIELD: Let's take a last question, and then if anybody has a last word we'll do it, and then we'll adjourn. Sir?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So do you think political humor has ever really changed the direction of a debate or sort of federal content, or is it only good for earning charisma points?

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Oh, it will win debates. I remember one of my campaigns where this guy said, "You know, Simpson's hiding something from us." I had told him I'd been on federal probation for shooting mailboxes and slugged a cop one night, and that wasn't enough for them.

But I got that out there before the media got to it, because they would have loved to have gotten that before I let it out, you know. Geez, they were just losing their marbles.

But this guy said, "I want to tell you that he says he's a native of Wyoming, but he was born in Denver." And I went, "Oh my God, how did you find out?" [Audience/panel laughter.] And that was the end of that. You know, I made all sorts of faces and ran around-- I always was in trouble making faces. You can be in a lot of trouble. And of course, the one worst-- Helen was there-- I said, "You know, you just kind of stick it in his kazoo," and I went, "He, he, he," like that. [Audience laughter.] And Helen said "That was a nice face you did there." [Audience laughter.]

HELEN THOMAS: I think repetition, also: "There he goes again," if you keep repeating that, it becomes very funny in a speech. Or, you know, "I paid for that microphone," that kind of thing.

JEFF GREENFIELD: I just think that whatever else it is, it is for a political figure, such a powerful device-- that's what I said at the beginning-- you use like nitroglycerine. You've got to know how to use it. You've got to now be tempted sometimes to be the funniest guy in the room, because— [voice trails off]

AL FRANKEN: That is big.

JEFF GREENFIELD: You know 9-11 did put a temporary stop to it. You know, for awhile jokes about the intelligence of the President weren't so funny when it was going to be up to him to protect the country from horrible things. You know, the luxury of that kind of humor was tempered, but it's back. It's back in full blossom. And it's probably, in some sense, Alan, a healthy thing. So, you know, watch *Saturday Night Live* to see the latest example of that this Saturday.

AL FRANKEN: I just thought of something. Because the last election was so close, you can point to a million things that changed the election one way or other. There was one moment where I thought Bush showed a sense of humor that probably-- Do you remember in the last debate-- I think it was the last debate-- that Gore came-- that just got-- invaded his private space?

JEFF GREENFIELD: I need to tell you, in one of my widely unread books, I learned this had been diagrammed out by the Gore campaign staff that he would invade Bush's space to prove to America how much taller he was. But, then I heard from the Bush people that they anticipated it. And I think this is so weird, but this is what Bush did. And I probably won't do as good a take as he did. But he did a thing. He's answering a question about something or other-- and I can't remember what it is, and I can't remember the thing, [audience laughter], and he's talking, he's talking, and you've got to get even closer, and he's talking, and he goes like this, and then does that. [Audience laughter.] You remember that moment?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah.

AL FRANKEN: That whole debate came down to that. I mean Gore walked, like, kind of, you know, Boris Karloff in a bad remake of *Frankenstein*. Bush looks over his shoulder, and he's just like "Oh, hi." And if you look at that, Bush did a very funny take. And it just-- everything-- First of all, it was strange, Gore coming over, and secondly, Bush's reaction was really funny. And as I said, that election was so close you could-- there were a million things. Someone farted at a "Get Out the Vote" rally in Gainesville the night before, and a few people left. That might have done it. [Audience laughter.]

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: A butterfly flutters its wings in the Andes and things fall--

AL FRANKEN: Yeah, yeah.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: Yours is a little earthier, but it's the same idea.

AL FRANKEN: Yes. So that's my example.

SEN. ALAN SIMPSON: There you go. The moral of that story, my friends--

AL FRANKEN: Don't ask that question.

JEFF GREENFIELD: -- is if you're ever in a debate for President of the United States, don't stalk your opponent. It'll come back to haunt you. Thanks for coming, thanks to the panel. [Audience applause.]

DEBORAH LEFF: Thanks very much. I am still a little bit worried about doing Google searches and getting the Kennedy Library Forums. While you're here I just want to let you know that we'd like you to come back Sunday at 4:00 when there's going to be a good forum on a somewhat less lighthearted subject: the Cuban Missile Crisis. We'll be having Caroline Kennedy here, we'll have Sergei Khrushchev, the son of Nikita Khrushchev, Ted Sorensen, Arthur Schlesinger, and host Josefina Vidal, first Secretary of the Cuban Sections. So we hope you'll join us Sunday at 4:00. Al Franken is going to be signing books, Helen Thomas signing books, and thank them again for a terrific time. Thanks.

[Audience applause.]