Censor-y Overload:
Sketch Comedy and Censorship on Television in the 1960s

Rowyn van Miltenburg

History Honors Thesis
Faculty Advisor: Professor Salim Yaqub
Seminar Leader: Professor Miroslava Chavez-Garcia
March 2020

At the 2015 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, President Barack Obama spent five minutes of his speech alongside comedian Keegan-Michael Key, who was acting as his "anger translator," Luther. After Obama made a remark in his calm and level-headed manner, Luther would provide a more colorful interpretation:

> Obama: In our fast-changing world, traditions like the White House Correspondents' Dinner are important.
> Luther: I mean, really?! What is this dinner? And why am *I* required to come to it?
> […]
> Obama: The science is clear. Nine out of the 10 hottest years ever came in the last decade.
> Luther: Now I'm not a scientist, but I do know how to count to ten.[1]

Obama and Key's routine received overwhelming laughter from the audience, and presumably from a great deal of C-SPAN viewers across the nation. The rest of Obama's 22-minute speech, even when unassisted by a professional comedian, was no different. It was unequivocally a comedy routine, and a successful one at that.

The White House Correspondents' Association Dinner has long been a platform for comedians. And, up until 2017, the sitting president often used the dinner as an opportunity to showcase his humor.[2] The event as a whole underscores how tightly politics and comedy are intertwined today. With countless political impersonations on *Saturday Night Live* and a handful of satirical news programs on television, it is hard to imagine a time when political comedy was not welcomed, or even demanded, as a form of entertainment on television.

Beyond highlighting the undeniable relationship between humor and politics, Obama's speech that evening also demonstrated an important use for comedy: a tool to say something that

---

[1] "President Obama Remarks at 2015 WHCA Dinner," C-Span, April 25, 2015, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4535549/president-obama-remarks-2015-whca-dinner.
[2] President Donald Trump has not attended the dinner since assuming office; Terrence Dopp, "Trump to Skip White House Correspondents' Dinner Again This Year," *Bloomberg News*, April 6, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-06/trump-to-skip-white-house-correspondents-dinner-again-this-year.

might not otherwise be accepted by society. Known for his calm, level-headed speaking style and presence throughout his presidency, Obama used his anger translator to inject more urgency and vigor into his rhetoric than was perhaps expected by American audiences. Fifty years prior to Obama's Correspondents' Dinner speech, the state of comedy was not much different in this regard. In the 1960s, humorists often used their stand-up routines to criticize the government, challenge social norms, or broach other topics that might be perceived as taboo in a different setting. When political humor and satire made its way onto television in the form of sketch-comedy shows in the sixties, however, it faced significant hurdles along the way.

This thesis examines the ways in which and reasons why sketch-comedy shows were censored and the strategies that the shows used to combat it. The humor in these television programs during the 1960s was often deemed too controversial for American audiences by network officials, and it, therefore, came face-to-face with censorship. To appropriately analyze these forms of censorship, this thesis will limit its scope to three popular sketch comedy television programs in the 1960s: *That Was the Week That Was*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In.* Each of these shows faced censorship, each for different reasons, and each program had different levels of success in combatting the censors. Overall, the battles these shows faced with censors and the ways in which the shows responded largely affected their respective success and fate as a television program. The acts of censorship could be subtle—oftentimes unnoticeable by viewers—and the ensuing efforts to get jokes and content past censors ranged from defiant to clever.

These censorship struggles and battles unfolded on the backdrop of the 1960s: a decade defined by social and political movements, rebellions, and resistance. While historians have pored over many aspects of the sixties, the story of comedy and satire has not been fully

uncovered. Historian Michael J. Heale contemplates the leading arguments about and analyses of the decade in his article "The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography." While he maintains that there exist multiple ways to categorize the sixties, he does draw an important conclusion after analyzing the competing ideas as a whole:

> Figures like Martin Luther King, George Wallace, Ralph Nader, and Lyndon Johnson may have been constrained by the system, but they also knew how to touch and bend it. They and others did make a difference, leaving to the historian the difficult task of showing how individuals and groups variously resisted, accommodated, manipulated, and enhanced the evolving Leviathan.[3]

This thesis seeks to take up that difficult task and situate these sketch-comedy shows—and the comedians behind them—within the realm of the sixties. While comedic television programs had a different function than King, Wallace, Nader, and Johnson, the following sections will discuss the ways in which these programs resisted the censorship of network censors and other controlling powers that might make up this so-called Leviathan. In doing so, this thesis aims to augment the understanding of the 1960s through the lens of sketch-comedy and its censorship.

Laying the Groundwork for Censorship on Television: Policy & Political Climate

In the 1930s, the federal government and private television networks began to roll out law and policy regarding content on television. These actions created a structure and set precedents for censoring comedic material for years to come. The climate of McCarthyism in the 1940s and the 1950s only further cemented the idea that regulations should exist for comedy on television.

[3] Michael J. Heale, "The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography," *Reviews in American History* 33, no.1 (2005), 148.

In 1934, Congress passed the Communications Act, effectively establishing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This body replaced the Federal Radio Commission and included managing television, telegraph, and telephone services, in addition to radio. The first lines of the act read, "[f]or the purpose of regulating interstate and foreign commerce in communication by wire and radio so as to make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States…"[4] The act outlined a series of regulations for communication broadcasting industries, including commercials and government use of these systems. Notably, however, section 326 of the Act explicitly states: "Nothing in this Act shall be understood or construed to give the Commission the power of censorship over the radio communications... and no regulation or condition shall be promulgated or fixed by the Commission which shall interfere with the right of free speech by means of radio communication."[5] While the act did not expressly state if the Commission had the authority to censor television programming, one can imagine Congress intended the Commission to treat television similar to radio. Either way, when it came to editing and censoring radio, television, and film content, it was private networks and organizations that took charge, not the FCC.

In 1934, the same year Congress established the FCC, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) created its own governing body to oversee radio programming—the Department of Continuity Acceptance. This new department had the goal of ensuring that radio content was fit for the network's listeners. In other words, it was responsible for censoring any material deemed inappropriate for American audiences. For example, the Department forbade radio programs from discussing homicides, mocking public officials, and using profanity, among

[4] *Communications Act of 1934*, U.S. Code 47 (1934).
[5] *Communications Act of 1934*, U.S. Code 47 (1934).

other things.[6] While the FCC was explicitly not allowed to censor radio programs, individual networks had guidelines in place to determine what material was fit to air. The ostensible goal of a body like NBC's Department of Continuity Acceptance was to tailor programming to delight—and not offend—the network's target audience.

Since it was a new and growing medium, television was subject to more scrutiny than radio in the 1950s. NBC understood it was important to put in place guidelines for television as it gained popularity throughout the country. One of the measures the network took was employing Stockton Helffrich to head the company's program and commercial-message acceptability, which served as the equivalent of NBC Radio's Department of Continuity Acceptance.[7] Television historian Robert Pondillo writes, "it became crucial for the budding industry and its leader, NBC, to have a set of well-considered censorship policies in full-view, an authoritative mechanism that a viewer-citizen could count on to control the new medium."[8] In an effort to ensure its viewers that the network took content seriously, NBC released a publication called *Responsibility: A Working Manual of NBC Program Policies*. In use until as late as 1960, the manual outlined the instances in which censorship was appropriate—and necessary—on television.[9] Helffrich drew from and referenced this document throughout his career at NBC. Until 1960, when he left his post at NBC, Helffrich was the network's head censor. He had the authority to cut, delete, and edit any material he deemed a violation of NBC's values and standards.[10] Helffrich's role was not only well-established but also incredibly influential, as he used his power as a censor to alter most shows' content. Helffrich's position, and its importance to the network, demonstrates the

---

[6] Robert Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, 3-4.
[7] Robert Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 15.
[8] Ibid., 55.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 14.

growing prevalence of censorship at the network level. Especially because it was in the early days of television, Helffrich played an important part in shaping the expected structure and process of a television network. In other words, Helffrich helped set a precedent for censoring television at the network level.

By 1952, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (NAB) had issued its own policy concerning comedy on television. The code, writes historian Stephen Kercher, "effectively prevented television humor from broaching subjects in a manner that might be construed as 'insensitive' or 'irresponsible.'"[11] Kercher argues that this rule was a response to the Red Scare: "Television's timidity during the early and mid-1950s is easily explained by the influence McCarthyism had on the American broadcast industry and the extreme aversion networks, advertisers, and television industry groups had for controversy of any kind."[12] Even before Senator Joe McCarthy became the face of the anticommunism in the country, the Red Scare infiltrated the media and entertainment industries. Most notably, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigated a group of prominent directors, writers, and producers dubbed the Hollywood Ten. Putting these men on trial for all of America to see undoubtedly affected the ways in which the film and television industries approached sensitive topics, such as politics, in the years to come. With comedians largely relying on topical political issues for their material, it is understandable why the NAB instituted limitations on comedy in the midst of McCarthyism. This climate played an immense role in setting the precedent for censoring comedy for decades to come.

The First Examples: Censoring Comedy on Variety and Talk Shows

[11] Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 346.
[12] Ibid.

With the advent of television, comedians found a new platform for their jokes and routines. Talk shows served as one of the first television formats on which comedians performed stand-up comedy. As such, these shows also served as the first instances of comedic censorship on television. Steve Allen and Jack Paar, two of the first hosts of NBC's *Tonight Show*, along with Ed Sullivan of CBS's *Ed Sullivan Show*, regularly invited stand-up comics to perform routines on their shows. Oftentimes the hosts were also comedically inclined and would show off their humorous sides with monologues to introduce each night's show—a tradition that most late night talk shows carry on to this day. With comedy, however, almost inevitably came trepidation from network executives and objection from the network censors.

A regular guest on Steve Allen's *Tonight* Show, comedian Lenny Bruce proved controversial on- and off-screen.[13] Bruce, while renowned for his comedy, was just as famous for his run-ins with authorities as for his 'obscene' stand-up routines. In the early sixties, Bruce was arrested several times on obscenity charges, which led to a series of legal battles.[14] Even before these legal difficulties, however, he joked with Allen's audience about his tendency to be problematic. On Allen's April 5, 1959, show, Bruce prefaced his stand-up routine by saying, "I promised Continuity I'd behave myself. I'll do all the lines we rehearsed."[15] In referencing NBC's Department of Continuity and Acceptance, Bruce alluded to his troublesome status. He continued his routine, "That's the thing, you know, I have a reputation for being sort of controversial and irreverent and also this semantic bear-trap of bad taste."[16] The audience chuckled at Bruce's self-aware admissions, signifying the comedian's controversial streak was well-known among the general public. Bruce's position in the entertainment world (which many

[13] Steve Allen was the first host of the *Tonight Show*, which still exists today on NBC.
[14] Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 416.
[15] Historic Films Stock Footage Archive, "Lenny Bruce on the Steve Allen Show April 5, 1959," YouTube video, 13:04, November 2, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3QgxmiBfNY.
[16] Ibid.

comedians shared) put networks in a tricky position: executives did not want to allow obscene jokes to mar their airwaves, but they also wanted to leverage the performer's fame. Many television and advertising executives understood, as Kercher explains, there was "a large, untapped market for hip, 'new wave' satire among affluent, educated middle-class viewers."[17]

The most popular show for satirists, according to Kercher, was Jack Paar's *Tonight Show*.[18] Paar took the mantle at NBC's *Tonight Show* in 1957 and hosted many famous guests throughout his tenure, particularly enjoying his comedian guests. Mort Sahl, a stand-up comedian known for his liberal satire, made four appearances between 1958 and 1962, and even filled in for Paar one night as host. Paar booked the comedy duo Elain May and Mike Nichols five times and Dick Gregory twelve times in those four years.[19] On these talk shows, censorship took a variety of forms. Since the show was pre-taped, NBC censors could actually delete material and jokes, or, at the request of the network, comics could soften their routines from the start. For example, one review of a Mort Sahl appearance on the *Eddie Fisher Show* said, "Sahl seemed to be working under velvet censorship—his material lacked its usual bite."[20] Whether it was a network censor pairing down comedic routines or comedians making adjustments themselves, the public often took note.

Even hosts of these programs were not free from the wrath of the network censors, as Jack Paar learned in 1960. In the February 10, 1960, taping of his show, Paar included a joke in his monologue that NBC censors decided to cut. Pondillo explained that the joke centered around a "misinterpretation of the initials W.C.—the woman in the story thought the letters meant 'water closet' (or toilet), but the man intended the initials to stand for 'Wayside Chapel.'"[21] Paar went

[17] Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 354.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] William Ewald, quoted in James Curtis, *Last Man Standing: Mort Sahl and the Birth of Modern Comedy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 92.
[21] Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor,* 112.

on to juxtapose imagery of a bathroom with a church, which made an NBC censor wary. Ultimately, the network decided to delete the joke and replace it with a news bulletin. Paar did not learn that he was censored until he watched the program later that evening.[22] The next night, after talking to the audience for just over 11 minutes, he walked off the *Tonight Show*, in protest against NBC's decision. In his monologue to the audience that night, he said, "The damage has been done. Not only to their property, this show, *The Tonight Show*, which they own, I do not, but to me personally… There must be a better way of making a living than this. There's a way of entertaining people without being constantly involved in some form of controversy." After he concluded, he was met with an over-forty-second applause. Paar did not return the next night, appearing to have quit the show.

Paar told only Hugh Downs, the show's narrator and the man who filled in for Paar after his exit that evening, that he would be walking off the show. In fact, not even his wife knew he was quitting. Since Paar kept his departure under wraps, NBC had no warning and, therefore, no other option other than to air Paar's exit. They did, however, add a voiceover to the beginning of the episode. It defended the network's actions as follows:

> As you will see shortly, during the taping of the *Jack Paar Program* earlier this evening, Jack Paar walked off the show in protest against the deletion of one of his stories from last night's show. In the exercise of its proper responsibility to the public, NBC deleted this material last night because it considered it to be in bad taste. It is NBC's hope that Jack Paar will reconsider his actions and return to the program.[23]

Jack Paar did return to the *Tonight Show* after only several away from the show. Paar picked up where he left off five weeks prior, addressing the audience after he walked on stage: "As I was saying… there must be a better way to make a living. Well, I have looked and there isn't."[24]

---

[22] Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor,* 112.
[23] Epaddon, "1960-Jack Paar Walks Off the Tonight Show," YouTube video, 1:12:52, September 30, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3dVEzLIQYQ.
[24] Larry Wolters, "Paar Returns as a Hero and Gets Censored Again," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* March 8, 1960.

While his return made it seem as if the censors had prevailed, Paar's extremely public departure drew national attention to the issue of censorship.

Censorship, and talk of it, most often came from the television networks, but comedian Vaughn Meader's routines grabbed the White House's attention. As a performer, Meader impersonated President John F. Kennedy. His album *The First Family,* which parodied the President and his family, was wildly popular and even won the Grammy for Best Album of the Year in 1963.[25] Meader was so skilled at portraying Kennedy, that one of the president's aides, the prominent historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., believed Meader's voice sounded "unmistakably" like his boss's. This prompted Schlesinger to write a memorandum for the President after he heard the album on the radio. He wrote:

> This raises the question of what in hell a President of the United States ought to do about mimicry. Obviously satire, irreverence, etc., are good things, and no sensible President ought to be in a position of being disturbed by them. On the other hand, confusing the listening audience is a bad thing. It seems to me that this is where the line should be drawn. So long as the mimicry is plainly and immediately identifiable as such -- as in night clubs; vaudeville; records played in private homes; television -- there can be no serious objection. But, when there is a chance that the unwary listener may think he is hearing the real thing, then a case can be made for blowing a whistle.[26]

Schlesinger, without explicitly saying it, tip-toed around the idea of censorship in this memorandum. He was concerned—and perhaps rightfully so—that listeners who may have not known better would mistake Meader's jokes for Kennedy's policies.

Following the release of *First Family*, many citizens wrote letters to Kennedy expressing concerns similar to Schlesinger's. In the fall of 1962 and into 1963—the period following the album's release—Kennedy's Press Secretary Pierre Salinger responded to a number of these letters. All of his responses fell in line with Schlesinger's belief that any mimicry of the

---

[25] "Winners & Nominees," grammy.com, Accessed December 5, 2019, https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/winners-nominees/139.

[26] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. White House Central Subject Files. Public Relations (PR). PR: 15-6: Impersonations: Executive. JFKWHCSF-0832-005-p0002. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

President should be "plainly and immediately identifiable."[27] In one such response, Salinger underscored the importance of distinguishing Meader from the President. He assured the concerned citizen, "we talked to the owners of the record company which produced this volume and they have since sent a wire to all radio stations in the country asking that proper identification be made; that the voice is Meader's and not the President's."[28] In another response Salinger sent several months later, he conveyed the same message, but with a more urgent tone: "We too are extremely concerned about the impersonation of the President by Vaughan [*sic*] Meader. I am calling this matter to the attention of Mr. Newton Minow, Chairman of the FCC, who has promised to look into it."[29] The FCC did get involved, and so did the National Association of Broadcasters.

The chairman of the FCC, Newton Minow, wrote a letter to the President that claimed, "[n]either the FCC nor the [National Association of Broadcasters] has received any complaints, other than one or two."[30] Despite the limited number of complaints the organizations received, the president of the NAB, former Florida Governor LeRoy Collins, sent out a newsletter to all radio stations concerning *The First Family*. Collins wrote that he believed the complaints surrounding the album "rest almost wholly on one's point of view or his sense of humor."[31] He ended the newsletter by saying, "My response to those inquiring here has been that I am confident that broadcasters are suitably identifying this recording 'fore and aft' for what it

---

[27] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. White House Central Subject Files. Public Relations (PR). PR: 15-6: Impersonations: Executive. JFKWHCSF-0832-005-p0002. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[28] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. White House Central Name File. Name File, 1961-1963. Meader, Vaughn. JFKWHCNF-1842-015-p0004. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[29] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. White House Central Name File. Name File, 1961-1963. Meader, Vaughn. JFKWHCNF-1842-015-p0006. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[30] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Departments and Agencies. Federal Communications Commission (FCC). JFKPOF-078-015-p0052. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[31] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Departments and Agencies. Federal Communications Commission (FCC). JFKPOF-078-015-p0053. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

actually is."[32] Collins' tone was much less urgent in the newsletter than Salinger's in his responses to the concerned citizens. Perhaps, having more familiarity with radio broadcasting and its consequences, Collins did not see the need to take more definitive action with Meader's album. Had *The First Family* violated any law or code—including the NAB's code limiting certain comedic material—radio stations would not have been allowed to broadcast it. Therefore, gripes held by the White House or concerned citizens originated elsewhere.

In fact, of the comedians of the era, Meader was one of the few, and perhaps the only, to explicitly notify and declare his respect for the president he was mocking. After he taped an appearance for the show *Talent Scouts*—and before the White House began receiving letters from concerned citizens—Meader sent Kennedy a telegram that read: "Dear Mr. President I respectfully call your attention to the Talent Scouts show which we taped last night for viewing on CBS television Tuesday night July 3… I impersonated you but I did it with great affection and respect hope it meets with your approval. Respectfully Vaughn Meader."[33] The message, which was cordial and seemingly genuine, suggested Meader meant no harm to the President.

In fact, during that appearance on *Talent Scouts*, Meader made a statement following his impersonation of the president. Speaking as himself, no longer in character, Meader addressed the country: "Thank you, the United States, a country where it is possible for a young comedian like myself to come out on television before millions of people and kid its leading citizen."[34] This statement, along with Meader's telegram to Kennedy, demonstrate the comedian's gratitude for his freedom of speech. More importantly, however, it seems to imply that Meader understood the controversial nature of his act and its tendency to invite backlash and criticism.

---

[32] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Departments and Agencies. Federal Communications Commission (FCC). JFKPOF-078-015-p0053. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[33] Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. White House Central Name File. Name File, 1961-1963. Meader, Vaughn. JFKWHCNF-1842-015-p0001. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
[34] Vaughn Meader, *Talent Scouts*, July 3, 1962, UCLA Film and Television Archives.

These are just a few examples, but they represent the beginnings of censoring comedy on television. Networks cutting comedic material, and presidents concerned over their portrayal on comedy shows continued throughout the 1960s. As we will see throughout this paper, these talk shows were merely a snippet of what was to come for comedy shows.

Borrowing from the Brits: *That Was The Week That Was* & Setting the Precedent for Satire on American Television, 1963-1964

Figure 1: The cast of the BBC's *That Was the Week That Was* on set, several months before it came to the US. (1963)

In November 1963, NBC introduced a new television program to the nation. *That Was the Week That Was* (*TW3*) had found great success in Great Britain on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The American version followed the same structure as its British predecessor, satirizing the week's current events, reading off jokes as if they were the nightly news. *TW3*'s format was similar to, and is often seen as foreshadowing, programs like *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" or *The Daily Show.* While the show was never censored in the sense that material was deleted or altered, its political and topical content were implicitly censored by NBC, affiliate networks, and advertisers. These instances laid the groundwork for networks to censor similar shows in the future.

The November showing of the NBC *TW3* was meant to test the waters to see if producing a full series was warranted among American audiences. Its introduction to the United States was a direct result of the British version's success. Paul Gardner, a writer for the *New York Times,*

explained: “because the British have successfully lampooned people and places in the news, American television producers have decided to take a step into the razor-sharp world of satire.”[35] While the one-hour special received mixed reviews across the board, *New York Times* columnist Jack Gould observed that “[b]y network standards the show marked a new and welcome freedom in irreverent comment.”[36] Several days later, Gould continued his praise for this new genre of American television: “Whatever the critical reaction to [*TW3*]... there is no gainsaying that the American edition of the British satirical show represented an important turning point for network TV.”[37] Even though it was not as critically acclaimed as its British counterpart, *TW3*’s hour-long special proved there was a market for satire in the United States.

The program returned to American airwaves for a short, yet meaningful, run over two seasons. The problems *TW3* faced—with regard to censorship, content, and more—often foreshadowed the struggles other comedy shows would deal with in the near future.

While NBC prepared to bring *TW3* to the United States, the BBC cancelled its version despite its success. The reasoning behind the show’s cancellation was unclear. Reporter James Feron wrote that the network publicly cancelled the show “because the political commentary might influence voters in next year’s general election… It is more widely believed, however, that the election, not expected before March at the earliest, was a convenient excuse to remove a turbulent experiment that never gained full acceptance within the upper levels of the B.B.C. Programs.”[38] Problems among the executives at the BBC foreshadowed what was in store for NBC and its rendition of the English show.

---

[35] Paul Gardner, "TV in U.S. Enters World of Satire: Leland Hayward to Offer a Preview on N.B.C." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Oct 14, 1963.
[36] Jack Gould, "TV: 'that was the Week that was': U.S. Version of British Program on N.B.C." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Nov 11, 1963.
[37] Jack Gould, "Turning Point: N.B.C. Lets New Revue Throw Barbed Shafts," *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Nov 17, 1963.
[38] James Feron, “"That Was the Week That Was' is Now Only a Memory in Britain: A Well-Thumbed Nose." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Dec 30, 1963.

TW3's first season aired during the 1964 presidential election, so opportunities to satirize and mock politician were in abundance. One joke, in reference to Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater's clinching the Republican nomination, said that some believed the Republican party was "on its way back." A cast member then retorted, making the show's liberal sentiments rather clear, "who knows, maybe one day it will even go forward."[39] A sketch later in the show portrayed two members of the Democratic National Committee contemplating who President Lyndon Johnson should choose as his running mate in the upcoming election. Wanting to balance the ticket, the men list qualities of the President to discern the attributes of the ideal running mate. For example, they decided that "[Johnson's] a temperate man, so we need a drunk."[40] After compiling a list, the men came to the conclusion that the party needs "a Northern, liberal isolationist who's an unmarried, atheistic alcoholic."[41] They paused for a minute to think before one asked, "Now, which one?"[42]

Because the program often broached contentious topics, many individuals and groups were not pleased with what *TW3* was broadcasting. While there is no evidence that the content of the show was ever altered or deleted in an act of explicit censorship, implicit censorship was alive and well. Many actions were taken to suggest that *TW3* and its writers should change the content they were producing. Despite putting pressure on the program, most authorities publicly denied that they would partake in censorship. These statements seemed to signal an understanding that censorship was wrong—or at least lead to poor public image in a country that touts its love of free speech.

---

[39] *That Was the Week that Was*, Season 1 unknown episode, UCLA Film and Television Archives.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

After NBC announced that *TW3* would return to American airwaves after its one-hour special, Jack Gould praised the network for its policy on the show's content. He wrote, "Robert E. Kitner, president of [NBC], insisted that members of the company recruited by Leland Hayward, the producer, be left alone and allowed to throw their barbed shafts at whomever and whatever they choose."[43] This was a highly optimistic statement, especially given the British version's recent departure from television due to its controversial nature. While NBC may have made a promise not to censor the show, historian Stephen Kercher believes that "there is little doubt that it managed to intervene surreptitiously."[44] The network did make several critical decisions that massively affected the content and the direction of the show.

When the show returned for a second season, NBC switched its time slot from Friday to Tuesday nights. While this would be inconsequential for most television programs, *TW3* relied on a week's worth of current events for its content. As Kercher described: "*TW3* was premised on the idea that it would use the news of the week as its primary source material, [and so]the move to Tuesday was nothing less than a kiss of death."[45]

The upcoming 1964 Presidential Election also gave NBC a reason to put a damper on *TW3*. The network stopped production of the show during both the Democratic and the Republican Conventions.[46] Forgoing an entire show, in addition to the timeslot change, led to the show's ultimate demise. Importantly, however, aside from NBC's scheduling decisions, the show was not receiving good reviews from critics. In a particularly scathing review, Jack Gould wrote of the show's season two premiere: "[*TW3*] returned last night with its inadequacy more apparent than a year ago. The show is neither witty nor funny, only embarrassing in its persistent

---

[43] Jack Gould, "Turning Point: N.B.C. Lets New Revue Throw Barbed Shafts," *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Nov 17, 1963.
[44] Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 384.
[45] Ibid., 385
[46] Ibid.

clumsiness and poor taste."[47] In response to NBC's preempting of *TW3* for election coverage, Gould quipped, "What a shame the campaign will be over in November."[48] While the changes at the network level likely affected the quality of the content, it is important to note that the show's reviews were never overwhelmingly positive.

One of the show's writers, Buck Henry, recalled his experience on the show in an interview with the Television Academy. He remembered the show having lawyers in the writers' room "all the time."[49] When asked of any instances in which the show cut material, Henry could only think of a joke that involved a then-famous racehorse. Due to the horse's high profile, the networks lawyers were fearful the show could face a lawsuit if the joke aired.[50] Other than this 'foal' joke, however, Henry said, "I don't think they tried to tame us down."[51] He said of the show's writers, "We were pretty insulting about Goldwater… There was no question where our sympathies lied [*sic*]."[52] Despite a very clear liberal slant throughout the show's content, Henry said of NBC executives, "I don't think they ever said be a little more Republican."[53] In this sense, the network did try to protect the writers' words and opinions.

NBC, however, was not the only body that could threaten the show with censorship. Affiliate networks and advertisers often cared about the content and subject matter of each week's show. Affiliate networks were the clearest example of outright censorship that the show faced. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, *TW3* often aired songs and jokes that promoted the

---

[47] Jack Gould. "TV: Tasteless Satire: 'that was the Week that was' Displays neither Wit nor Humor in Return." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Sep 30, 1964.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Buck Henry, "Buck Henry," interviewed by Jenni Matz, Television Foundation Academy, February 26, 2009, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/buck-henry.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

civil rights agenda.[54] While NBC thought these shows were appropriate to air, many affiliate networks in the South did not, and many southern affiliate networks dropped the show.[55] This demonstrated the wide spectrum of opinions across the nation, and it showed that jokes could be received very differently depending on the communities in which they aired.

The show's advertisers were another group that had the leverage—and motivation—to cut and alter the content of *TW3*. In fact, advertisers sent representatives to watch the program's rehearsals. According to Kercher, "advertisers sponsoring *TW3* were not allowed to 'censor' material, [but] the presence of their representatives at rehearsals undoubtedly had its effects."[56] The most public incident between the show and a sponsor appeared in the *New York Times* one morning before the show was scheduled to air. Gould reported that *TW3* was planning to spoof the adverse health effects of cigarettes and that "the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, has told N.B.C. that if the sketch goes on the air as scheduled it wants its one-minute commercial deleted."[57] At the time of print, it was unclear how NBC would proceed. That night, though, the network aired the sketch and the tobacco company "elected to take the night off."[58] Despite being one of *TW3*'s greatest critics, Jack Gould raved about that night's show. He said that *TW3* "began to find its sting last night. The issue of cigarettes and cancer not only was done, but done hilariously."[59] The topic of tobacco was clearly contentious, but perhaps the controversial nature of the jokes gave way to such a positive review.

Either way, the show saw its demise after its second season. Many factors probably played into the show's ending, including NBC's scheduling decisions and the less-than-glowing

---

[54] The Freedom Summer was a Civil Rights effort during the summer of 1964, which aimed to bring attention to the violence and oppression faced by blacks in Mississippi.
[55] Kercher, *Revel with a Cause*, 374.
[56] Ibid., 384.
[57] "'T.W. 3' Smoking Spoof Gets in Sponsor's Eye." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Jan 24, 1964.
[58] Jack Gould, "TV: Finding the Target: ' that was the Week that was' Spoofs Cigarette Smokers and Cancer Link." *New York Times (1923-Current File),* Jan 25, 1964.
[59] Ibid.

reviews throughout its two years on the air. Even during the show's first episode as a regular program on the network, its cast members referenced the mixed reviews of the November 1963 special. The episode began, "We are delighted to be back as a regular series. To those of you who wrote in that you hated our pilot show, wait 'till you see this one."[60] On top of varied reviews from the beginning, *TW3* was incredibly controversial, but that was exactly what it was intended to be. Alan Alda, who guest-starred on *TW3*, recalled in his interview for the Television Academy: "I think it was more biting in the English version."[61] It failed to receive the critical acclaim of its British counterpart, but many of the writers involved on the show chalked that up to the show's format. The BBC did not have a strict time constraint for its show, and it often ran over its scheduled time slot. Buck Henry said this made the show more "freeform" than NBC's version, which was "fairly rigid" due to the half-hour time constraint.[62] Despite its short run, *TW3* left an important mark on the history of television, setting not only the precedent for satire on television but also the precedent for censorship of comedy programs.

Tom Lehrer, who wrote most of the show's satirical songs, spoke to the issue of partiality in the realm of satire years later: "To write a funny song you have to be against something—you can't be *for* something… Humor isn't going to convince anyone. It wouldn't do any good; it wouldn't work. Satire doesn't move people, it only makes people who are already on our side feel better."[63] He and his fellow writers likely believed this during the show's tenure as well, and it gives an interesting insight into the motivations of the show. Perhaps *TW3* did not intend to make grand political statements and incite change, but rather appeal to audiences with similar political views.

---

[60] *That Was the Week that Was*, season 1 episode 1, January 10, 1964, UCLA Film and Television Archives.
[61] Alan Alda, Television Academy Interview.
[62] Buck Henry, "Buck Henry," interviewed by Jenni Matz, Television Foundation Academy, February 26, 2009, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/buck-henry.
[63] Tom Lehrer, quoted in Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 148.

One of the greatest accomplishments of *TW3*, however, was that it proved there was a market for satire in America. It laid the groundwork for satirical sketch comedy shows in the near and distant future, including *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*. Not only did *TW3* pave the way for these shows, but its struggles with the network, advertisers, and critics provided a glimpse into what these shows should expect during their tenures. *TW3* mostly dealt with implicit censorship. While there were groups that tried to regulate the show's content, many of them—NBC and advertisers, included—explicitly stated they were against or were expressly forbidden from censoring the show. There was an ostensible understanding that censorship was not viewed positively among the American public. As we will see in the upcoming sections, however, this general sentiment did not stop future shows from facing the wrath of network censors. *TW3*'s struggles demonstrate that there was a precedent for the censorship battles *Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In* would face in the late 1960s.

A "two-front war": *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*'s long-fought battles with censorship, 1967-1969

Figure 2: Tom (left) and Dick Smothers on the set of their CBS show *The Smother Brothers Comedy Hour*.

If *That Was the Week That Was* skirmished with NBC censors, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* waged an all-out war with CBS. Beginning as a folk-singing, sibling comedy duo in the San Francisco Bay Area, Tom and Dick Smothers rose through the comedy ranks in the fifties and sixties before landing their own sketch comedy show in 1967: *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (Comedy Hour).* Throughout the program's three seasons, the brothers often found themselves at odds with CBS censors over the show's often-political content. In 1969, the network cancelled *Comedy Hour* in the middle of its third season, claiming a breach of contract. The brothers and the show's writers now believe that, at that time, CBS was searching for any reason to get the program off the air at the behest of the newly inaugurated President Richard

Nixon, who surely was not a fan of the brothers' relentless liberal satire and blatant anti-war rhetoric. Regardless of the reasoning behind *Comedy Hour*'s demise, the show's history demonstrates the significant hurdles comedy faced on television in the 1960s.

Known for its topical folk songs, biting satire, and overtly liberal stance, *Comedy Hour* also regularly welcomed notable guest stars. The program's ninth show snagged a rather prestigious guest in the world of comedy, and one that would introduce the Smotherses to their first censorship battle: Elaine May. As a special guest, May penned a three-part sketch for that evening's show. The sketch did not make it to air that night because the network censors labeled it in "bad taste." May's piece did, however, wind up in *The New York Times* the following week. The *Times* published part one of three next to an article about the show's recent battles with network censors. Together, the two pieces filled two-thirds of a page of *The Times'* Sunday paper on April 16, 1967.[64]

The Times printed the sketch's script, giving credit to May, with the headline "The Sketch That Couldn't Be Done." Under May's byline, a sub-headline prefaced the script that followed, reading "This is the first part of a three-part sketch that Miss May wrote for 'The Smothers Brothers.' It was ruled out for 'bad taste.'"[65] To the left of the script, an article penned by reporter Judy Stone, who interviewed the brothers, delved into the incident and the brothers' tendency to push the envelope.

In the interview, "the brothers said that CBS had been 'very lenient' in permitting the brand of gentle satire that made them a music and comedy hit."[66] *Comedy Hour* hosted musical guests that Stone deemed 'controversial,' like Buffalo Springfield and Simon and Garfunkel.[67]

---

[64] Elaine May, "The Sketch That Couldn't Be Done," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1967.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Judy Stone, "Two Clean-Cut Heroes Make Waves," *The New York Times,* April 16, 1967.
[67] Ibid.

CBS did draw the line, however, preventing appearances by musician Pete Seeger and Senator Everett Dirkson because they were considered too political.[68] While the network never censored or cut any material prior to May's sketch, there had been talk about what was, and what was not, appropriate to air. For example, the brothers wanted to invite stand-up comedian Mort Sahl, who was known for his political satire, to perform on the show, but "they [knew] the network wouldn't hold still for him."[69] At that point—before April 1967—there was merely a line drawn in the sand; the brothers understood some material and some guests were not permissible by CBS's standards. Not until May's sketch did *Comedy Hour* come head-to-head with the CBS censors.

The topic of May's sketch was, quite fittingly, censorship. It featured two movie censors—played by May and Tom Smothers—exchanging notes on a film they had just watched for screening.[70] May's character did not like the use of the word "breast," suggesting they replace it with "wrist" and change the line to "my pulse beats wildly in my wrist whenever you're near."[71] Smothers's character is uncomfortable with a scene of a college biology class using the word "reproduce."[72] The fictional censors pick apart the language of the movie for being tasteless, just as the CBS censors did to May's sketch.

In response to CBS's cutting of the sketch, Tom Smothers said, "I think the networks have a say in good taste, but it is always abused. That's the trouble with censorship. This is our first real confrontation with the problem."[73] While it was the show's first encounter with

---

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Elaine May, "The Sketch That Couldn't Be Done," *The New York Times,* April 16, 1967.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Judy Stone, "Two Clean-Cut Heroes Make Waves," *The New York Times,* April 16, 1967.

censorship, it certainly was not the last. This marked only a beginning of a long-fought struggle between the Smothers brothers and CBS, one that Stone likened to a "two-front war."[74]

The feud between the brothers and the network persisted and generated enough public interest for *The New York Times* to cover it repeatedly. Eight months after May's sketch was cut, *Times* reporter George Gent wrote an article about the show's continued struggles with the CBS censors. Tom Smothers talked to Gent and explained some of the pieces that the network cut from the prior broadcast. In one example, Gent described a sketch that featuring a hippie who "invites Tom to 'share a little tea' with her and then explains 'I'm drinking it today.'"[75] Network censors altered the line to exclude any implication of drug use.[76]

Gent went on to call the show's battle with the censors "highly publicized" and remarked that "[t]here is also some evidence for believing that not everyone in high places at the network is unhappy about the publicity being given the show over the censorship issue."[77] Gent brought into question the true motivation for the CBS censors. Ostensibly, the network wanted to curate tasteful programming during its broadcasts. *Comedy Hour*, however, was in the same time slot as, and therefore in direct competition with, NBC's *Bonanza*, the country's most watched show until *Comedy Hour* hit the airwaves.[78] Tom Smothers echoed this belief that CBS welcomed some of this publicity-inducing controversy, saying, "[The censorship struggles] created some interest and then it got out of control."[79]

By its third season, *Comedy Hour* was well on its way to being out of control, at least according to many of its viewers. After *Comedy Hour's* season three premiere in September

---

[74] Ibid.
[75] George Gent, "Smothers Show Censored Anew: Portions of Sunday's Show Blipped for Bad Taste," *The New York Times*, January 27, 1968.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Judy Stone, "Two Clean-Cut Heroes Make Waves," *The New York Times,* April 16, 1967.
[79] Tom Smothers, "Tom and Dick Smothers," interview by Karen Herman, Television Academy Foundation, October 14, 2000, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/dick-smothers.

1968, CBS took 150 calls regarding the broadcast. A document titled "Report on incoming telephone calls' recorded 140 unfavorable calls, out of the 150 received. One viewer remarked that the episode was "the trashiest thing we've ever seen on television."[80] Another questioned the brothers' allegiance: "Aren't they Americans and why doesn't anyone have any control over what they say over television?"[81] One caller expressed disdain not only for the show, but also for its advertisers, saying, "Tell Smothers Bros. they are rotten and anyone who has any advertising on their show has to be rotten too."[82] This comment must have really scared CBS executives since advertisers were a big source of revenue.

In response to this episode, Perry Lafferty, an executive at CBS, wrote a lengthy plea, urging the Smotherses to tone down their material. He attached the phone call report, saying "These are the people speaking. The ones from whence all ratings flow. The local reaction was devastating."[83] Lafferty's memo addressed censorship and encouraged the brothers to avoid voicing their opinions on the show:

> The fears I have discussed with you so many times in the past now seem to be coming true. I have said that the essence of your show must be entertainment and not an exercise in personal opinions, no matter how they are cloaked… Let's stop worrying about censorship and wasting all this valuable time in 'how far you can go.' I appeal to you again to… put this show back on the winning track where you began.[84]

Lafferty made it clear that this was his first time trying to reason with the show and its content. He also underscored his belief, which was likely shared by the network, that the show could be much more successful without the Smotherses constantly professing their opinions on politics.

---

[80] Report on Incoming Telephone Calls, September 29, 1968, Tommy Smothers Collection, National Comedy Center.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] CBS Memorandum from Perry Lafferty to Tom and Dick Smothers, October 1, 1968, Tommy Smothers Collection, National Comedy Center.
[84] Ibid.

Given the frequency with which the show discussed politics, however, the brothers' opinions almost seemed essential to the show.

One of the *Comedy Hour's* few victories over CBS censors, and an exemplary display of the politics that became a hallmark of the program, was Pete Seeger's performance of his song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." The song, clearly an allegory for the Vietnam War, was cut completely from the show's September 10, 1967, broadcast. Originally, the censors wanted to delete certain lines from the song, but Tom Smothers fiercely advocated for the inclusion of the song in its entirety.[85] After the song was removed from the broadcast, the brothers relentlessly broached the topic in every interview they did. This publicity around the song's deletion, coupled with changing opinions on the Vietnam War, eventually convinced CBS to capitulate and allow Seeger's performance in February 1968. The song, at its core, criticized the war and the continued efforts of the American government:

> Well, I'm not going to point any moral;
> I'll leave that for yourself
> Maybe you're still walking, you're still talking
> You'd like to keep your health.
> But every time I read the papers
> That old feeling comes on;
> We're waist deep in the Big Muddy
> And the big fool says to push on
>
> [...]
> Waist deep! Neck deep! Soon even a
> Tall man'll be over his head, we're
> Waist deep in the Big Muddy!
> And the big fool says to push on![86]

The "big fool" in Seeger's song was a clear reference to—and criticism of—President Lyndon Johnson and his escalation of the Vietnam War. Two days after CBS allowed the song on

[85] David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, (1st Touchstone Hardcover ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 136.
[86] Pete Seeger, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," track 4 on *Waist Deep in the Big Muddy and Other Love Songs*, 1967.

air, the network broadcast another program that, to a certain degree, echoed Seeger's hesitation towards the war. On a *CBS News Special*, the network's evening news anchor Walter Cronkite reported, "For it seems now, more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate… It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could."[87] Seeger's song and Cronkite's report came in the midst of the Tet Offensive, during which the media's extensive coverage dispelled any American hopes that the United States was making progress in Vietnam. In addition to the media coverage, Cronkite's broadcast marked a shift in American opinion of the Vietnam War.

Often branded as 'the Most Trusted Man in America,' Cronkite probably carried more weight among CBS viewers with his statement than Seeger did with "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Nonetheless, Seeger recounted, "President Johnson decided not to run again a month after I finally got [the song] on the air."[88] Regardless of Johnson's motivations for not seeking reelection, *Comedy Hour* had already thrown its support behind one of their own in the race for the Democratic nomination.

Pat Paulsen first discussed his campaign on *Comedy Hour* on January 28, 1968. On that evening's show, Tom Smothers asked Paulsen, a program regular, about "rumors" that he was considering running for public office. "Absolutely not," Paulsen said at first. He then changed his tone: "What office, I am not at liberty to say. Therefore I wish to say, with regard to the presidency of the United States, I will not run if nominated. And if elected, I will not serve."[89] After seemingly denying his candidacy, however, he thanked Tom for letting him dispel rumors

[87] CBS Evening News, "50 years ago: Walter Cronkite calls for the U.S. to get out of Vietnam," February 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn2RjahTi3M.
[88] Pete Seeger, quoted in *Dangerously Funny*, 172.
[89] Pat Paulsen on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, quoted in *Dangerously Funny*, 218.

"this early in my campaign."[90] Paulsen's bid for the presidency continued throughout the 1968 election cycle.

The satirical stunt was met with positive reviews, so much so that CBS ordered a one-hour special called "Pat Paulsen for President," which preempted that night's *Comedy Hour*. *Washington Post* reporter Lawrence Laurent wrote a review following the special. He declared, "'Pat Paulsen for President' is one of those gags that began in fun and stayed that way."[91] The episode followed Paulsen giving stump speeches across the nation: "In each community, [Paulsen] declared that it, alone, is his favorite. Each community is 'filled with real people—not like those phonies in California.' When he returned to California, of course, he declared it to be his true home, 'not full of phonies like those other places.'"[92] Viewers also learned that the Paulsen campaign raised money by selling cookies and lemonade.[93] Perhaps Paulsen's appearances were persuasively funny or maybe, though less likely, he resonated with the country; either way, the campaign had a rather strong showing for something that was ostensibly a satirical gag.

As of August 15, 1968, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Paulsen had won "two [votes] in the Pennsylvania primary, four in the Wisconsin primary, and 75% of the vote as write-in candidate for student body president at Tappan Zee High School in Orangeburg, N.Y."[94] In response to this swell of votes, Paulsen responded, "There's no stopping that kind of snowballing support."[95] While the support was not nearly enough to win him the election, he was right in the sense that it was enough support to continue his campaign in subsequent presidential

---

[90] Ibid.
[91] Lawrence Laurent, "Pat Paulsen Campaign Reaches Peak," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973),* Oct 22, 1968.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Steven M. Lovelady, "President Paulsen? 'America's Savior' is Joking—Isn't He?," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1968.
[95] Ibid.

elections. In fact, as recently as the 1996 New Hampshire Primary, he garnered over 1,000 votes, coming in second to incumbent President Bill Clinton's almost 77,000 votes.[96] Paulsen may have never made it to the White House, but his satirical act certainly struck a chord with viewers (and some voters, too).

Paulsen did not prevail and, in reality and outside of the confines of *Comedy Hour*, Tom and Dick Smothers supported the Democratic Nominee Hubert Humphrey by election day in November. The brothers made this sentiment clear in a letter to President Johnson on October 31, 1968, a mere five days before the election. Having been highly critical of Johnson's war policies on the show, the Smotherses apologized to the President on the heels of his announcement to halt bombing in North Vietnam:[97]

> During the past couple of years we have taken satirical jabs at you and more than occasionally overstepped our bounds. We disregarded the respect due the office and the tremendous burden of running the country because of our own emotional feelings regarding the war. We frequently disregarded the many, many good works and the progress the country has made under your administration.
>
> We saw the television broadcast you made last night in behalf of the Democratic Party and Hubert Humphrey and were quite moved by your sincerity and by the content of the message. If the opportunity arose in this coming election to vote for you, we would.
>
> Often an emotional issue such as the war makes people tend to over-react. Please accept our apology on behalf of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* for our overreaction in some instances. Please know that we do admire what you have done for the country and particularly your dignity in accepting the abuse of so many people.
>
> We are now working for the election of Hubert Humphrey and much of the enthusiasm we have for him is due to that broadcast of yours.

---

[96] 1996 Democratic Presidential Primary Results, State of New Hampshire, https://sos.nh.gov/1996DemPresPrim.aspx.

[97] On October 31, 1968, President Johnson addressed the nation in a television broadcast. He said, "I have now ordered that all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam cease as of 8 a.m., Washington time, Friday morning…. And I have reached it in the belief that this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war." This decision, days before the 1968 Presidential election, marked a turning point in the war and the United States' policies toward the war and largely inspired the Smotherses letter; Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69. Volume II, entry 572, pp. 1099-1103. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1970.

> We just saw your message on Viet Nam and with all America, we are pleased at your determined move to halt the bombing in an effort to achieve peace.[98]

Coming from a duo that fought censors tooth-and-nail to include material like Seeger's LBJ-critical "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," this letter marked a stark change in their position leading up to election day. Perhaps the siblings had anticipated that their next president would not be such an easy target or, as evidenced by Johnson's response, as good of a sport.

Four days after Humphrey's defeat and Richard Nixon's victory, Johnson sent a response addressed to "Messrs. Smothers:"

> I am very grateful for your kind and thoughtful letter.
>
> To be genuinely funny at a time when the world is in crisis is a task that would tax the talents of a genius; to be consistently fair when standards of fair play are constantly questioned demands the wisdom of a saint.
> It is part of the price of leadership of this great and free nation to be the target of clever satirists. You have given the gift of laughter to our people. May we never grow so somber or self-important that we fail to appreciate the humor in our lives.
>
> If ever an Emmy is awarded for graciousness, I will cast my vote for you.[99]

This was a strong show of support for comedians and their jobs—or perhaps duties—as satirists, especially from a President of the United States. The idea that presidents should expect satire, if not encourage it, is a concept that the Smotherses alleged Johnson's successor did not take to heart.

In April 1969, four months after President Nixon took office, CBS cancelled *Comedy Hour.* The network's decision, according to CBS, was due to *Comedy Hour*'s failure to comply with a policy instituted six months prior. In October 1968 the program came under fire for a performance of a satirical sermon. CBS deleted only one joke from the sermon, which involved

---

[98] Letter from Tom and Dick Smothers to Lyndon B. Johnson, October 31, 1968, Tommy Smothers Collection, National Comedy Center.
[99] Letter from President Lyndon B. Johnson to Tom and Dick Smothers, November 9, 1968, Tommy Smothers Collection, National Comedy Center.

Moses taking the Lord's name in vain, yet the response the network received from affiliates motivated a change in policy. A CBS executive wrote the Smotherses following the broadcast: "We are subject to possibly losing from 15 to 40 affiliates on your program. They now demand a closed-circuit telecast of your show on Friday prior to its airing on Sunday, and will decide at that time whether or not they will carry the show on Sunday, depending upon material on the show. If they do not see a closed circuit, they will not carry the show."[100] This new policy acted as a punishment of sorts, and expressly restricted the show's freedom during each episode's production process.

At the start of the next show, and largely in response to the sermon, *Comedy Hour* welcomed a surprise guest: George Harrison. After Harrison declared he had something important to say, the Smotherses warned the Beatle that oftentimes the network makes it hard to say anything of note. Harrison responded, "Well, whether you can say it or not, keep trying to say it."[101] To conclude that show, Tom Smothers issued an apology concerning the prior week's controversial sermon. He said, "We're sorry that some of you out there didn't see the piece as we did. Because it was not our intention to offend anyone. To those of you who were offended, we apologize, but we don't regret having done it… We feel that God has a sense of humor… We figure that God will forgive us, even if some of you don't."[102]

The apology was not enough to reverse the new policy. Now, the show had a tight turn-around, having a much shorter time to tape and edit the show before handing it over to the networks for the affiliates to screen. CBS did not receive a preview tape for *Comedy Hour'*s April 6, 1969, episode, which was set to air on Easter Sunday. The network jumped on this opportunity, airing a rerun in place of a new episode that Sunday and cancelling the show

[100] Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 231.
[101] George Harrison, quoted in *Dangerously Funny,* 211.
[102] Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny,* 233.

altogether.[103] The program's failure to produce a tape for pre-screening on time was the main reason the network claimed it ended the show. Tom and Dick Smothers and some of the show's writers would beg to differ.

The alternate reasoning for CBS's decision to pull *Comedy Hour* off the air had to do with the country's new Commander-in-Chief, Richard Nixon. Tom Smothers believed that Nixon had a great deal of influence at CBS and imagined the President telling network executives to find a way to get the program off of television in any way possible.[104] Steve Martin, who began his lengthy comedy career as a writer on *Comedy Hour*, recounted the show's demise in his memoir: "Ostensibly, CBS canceled the show because of late delivery of an episode, but I knew what really had canceled it: a trickle-down from President Nixon. The Brothers had surely made Nixon's enemies list, and probably all of us writers had, too."[105] Given *Comedy Hour'*s strong liberal leanings and anti-war sentiments, it is not hard to imagine that Nixon would have an axe to grind with the show.

The Smothers brothers' battle with CBS did not end in 1969, however. The siblings took the network to court, arguing that the requirement to deliver the tape on Wednesdays was never officially written into the show's contract. In Tom Smothers' deposition, the comedian recounted several of the censorship battles with CBS. In one exchange, the questioning attorney asked about a song that included the phrase "son-of-a-bircher."

> Attorney: Is it your best recollection that they requested deletion of those lines because the lines came dangerously close to 'son-of-a-bitch' and people would attach that significance to those lines?
> Tom Smothers: That might very well have been their contention.
> Attorney: Did you agree with that contention?

---

[103] Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny,* 308.
[104] Tom Smothers, "Tom and Dick Smothers," interview by Karen Herman, Television Academy Foundation, October 14, 2000, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/dick-smothers.
[105] Steve Martin, *Born Standing up: A Comic's Life*, (1st Scribner Hardcover ed. New York: Scribner, 2007), 118.

Tom Smothers: I don't believe I did.[106]

Tom Smothers, even after his tenure at CBS, continually contested the network and its actions against the show. In fact, he even referred to his temper as his "fatal flaw." He said, "If I didn't get my way, I [had] a tendency not to pout, but to have a confrontation."[107] While this flaw of his probably exacerbated censorship struggles at CBS, it was also a motivating factor in pursuing legal action against the network. Tom and Dick Smothers eventually won the case in 1973, with the court awarding the brothers close to one million dollars in damages.[108]

Overall, *Comedy Hour* faced highly publicized censorship battles throughout its three-season tenure on CBS. Overtly and deliberately liberal, the program was known for its unwavering stance against the Vietnam War. *Comedy Hour'*s highly political nature often caused the network's censors to take action but, thanks to Tom Smothers's tenacity and desire to speak freely, the show found methods for publishing material elsewhere and eventually convincing CBS censors to relent. While the true face behind *Comedy Hour*'s cancellation is uncertain, it is clear that someone—whether it was Nixon or a CBS executive—wanted to put an end to the program's biting satire. Either way, *Comedy Hour* paved the way for satire of its kind on television. The show also demonstrated, however, that confrontation might not be the most productive answer to censorship.

---

[106] Deposition of Thomas Bolyn Smothers, III, September 14, 1970, Tommy Smothers Collection, National Comedy Center Archives, 131-132.
[107] Tom Smothers, "Tom and Dick Smothers," interview by Karen Herman, Television Academy Foundation, October 14, 2000, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/dick-smothers.
[108] Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 331

"Censors coming up the wazoo": *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, 1967-1973

Figure 2: The cast of NBC's *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* on one of the program's signature colorful sets. (1968)

In the fall of 1967, NBC aired a one-off television special hosted by a comedic duo—Dan Rowan and Dick Martin—that frequented night clubs across the country. Named after its hosts, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (*Laugh-In)* was soon picked up by NBC as a full series and continued its run until the early 1970s. The title riffed off of the sit-ins, love-ins, and be-ins of the Civil Rights era and Counterculture of the 1960s. During the first show, Rowan explained the title, "This is a laugh-in, and a laugh-in is a frame of mind. For the next hour, we'd just like you

to sit back and laugh."[109] That was the show's mission, which its writers and cast largely sought to accomplish throughout its five-year run. Like the Smothers Brothers, *Laugh-In* faced battles with its network censors. Unlike its CBS counterpart, however, *Laugh-In* did not spend much time resisting the censors. Instead, the show employed clever wordplay that often went over the censors' heads or phrased jokes in a particular way, so as to avoid controversy. These tactics, coupled with a perhaps unlikely connection to the White House, allowed *Laugh-In* to keep censors and politicians at bay while it maintained its cutting-edge humor.

When it first aired in 1967, *Laugh-In* was completely different from any type of program on television at that point. The show's humor was fast, and it took full advantage of new technological advances, such as color television and camera zooms. One of *Laugh-In*'s co-creators and its producer, George Schlatter, said in his Television Foundation interview that he wanted *Laugh-In* to be "[a] show that would use the medium as more than just a means of transmission."[110] The show moved at a rapid pace, which Schlatter said was meant to be a response to "the shrinking attention span that would have been brought about by advertising."[111] While he said it took audiences some time "to get adjusted to [the format], and to get into that pace and that energy," Schlatter said that once they did get used to the show, "it took off."[112]

It did indeed take off. *Laugh-In* was highly regarded throughout the industry. In 1968, after the program's first season, *Laugh-In* won four of the seven Emmys for which it was nominated.[113] In addition to the industry accolades, according to Nielsen statistics, the program

---

[109] *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, September 9, 1968.
[110] George Schlatter, "George Schlatter," interview by Dan Pasternack, Television Academy Foundation, March 6, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-schlatter.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] The Television Academy, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In: Awards and Nominations," emmys.com/shows/rowan-and-martins-laugh.

was the number-one rated series in both the 1968-1969 and 1969-1970 television seasons.[114] Even after its season three premiere, which followed the show's rather predictable lineup of sketches, critic Jack Gould wrote in the *New York Times*, "'Laugh-In' is not without a flavor of predictability with each passing season. But the sheer speed with which the presentation moves from one blackout to another does not invite brooding."[115] *Laugh-In*'s pace and topical humor set the show up for a successful run on NBC.

In what became a hallmark segment of *Laugh-In*, cast members popped in and out of doors and holes in a brightly colored wall telling jokes as Rowan and Martin signed off each evening. This rather impressive feat of set design was dubbed the 'joke wall,' and cast members moved at such a rapid pace during the segment that they often succumbed to laughter themselves. The joke wall was fast-paced and colorful, not unlike the show's humor.

Like that of *TW3* and *Comedy Hour*, *Laugh-In*'s content was mostly topical. In a segment called "Laugh-In Looks at the News," Martin would read off, and then spoof, the current events of the week, much as *TW3* did. For example, he poked fun at President Nixon's recent decision to appoint former child actress Shirley Temple as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly. Martin said, "In response to public criticisms. The spokesman for the [Nixon] administration said today, 'We appointed Shirley Temple a member of the delegation to the General Assembly for two good reasons. First, she's a loyal Republican and second, if we didn't, she'd threaten to hold her breath until she turned blue."[116]

After Martin parodied the current events, Rowan would read the "News of the Future," postulating what would be going on in the world 20 years from then. An eerily accurate joke

---

[114] Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-present*, 7th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), xvii.
[115] Jack Gould. "TV: 'Laugh-in' Dispels Doubt of Timorous Season." *New York Times,* Sep 16, 1969.
[116] *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, season 3, episode 7, October 7, 1969.

read: “Berlin, 20 years from now, 1989. There was dancing in the streets today as East Germany finally tore down the Berlin Wall. The joy was short lived, however, as the wall was quickly replaced with a moat full of alligators.”[117] *Laugh-In’*s news segments kept the show current, and often underscored its political undertones.

Despite constantly broaching the subject of politics, the show strove to balance its political opinions. Schlatter said of the program, “we tried to have the audience never aware of intent, never aware we had an agenda or that we were selling them one political philosophy or another.”[118] In fact, the writers “[tried] deliberately and intently to do jokes on both sides.”[119] Schlatter admitted, though, that the entire show was “rather unanimously opposed to the [Vietnam] War and the proliferation of nuclear energy and pollution.”[120] When *Laugh-In* did talk about those things, however, Schlatter said, “we wouldn’t dwell on it.”[121]

As with *TW3* and *Comedy Hour*, *Laugh-In* often faced censorship at the network level over its content. Echoing Tom Lehrer, Schlatter remarked, “there’s no pro-establishment humor. There’s also no victimless humor… There's going to be somebody angry with you for everything.”[122] Even though Schlatter understood the reasoning for much of the censorship his show faced, it did not mean that he would let the censors alter or the show’s content down without a fight. Unlike their predecessors on *TW3* and *Comedy*, however, *Laugh-In*’s writers were often successful in their battles with NBC censors and, if not, willing to reason with them to push their content through to air.

---

[117] *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*, season 2, episode 23, written by Paul Keyes, March 10, 1969.
[118] George Schlatter, “George Schlatter,” interview by Dan Pasternack, Television Academy Foundation, March 6, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-schlatter.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

Since *TW3* aired on NBC, the network became more structured in its use of censors. As Dick Martin recounted in his Television Academy interview, "The idea was that every show would send a script up to [the Standards and Practice department]." Martin recalled that "every script was just a fist fight."[123] The writers did fight to keep their content, and they often found clever ways to work around the censors' demands. While the writers cast were supposed to abide by the department's changes, Martin said, "We didn't do the show exactly as it was written." This resulted in Standards and Practice sending someone down to supervise the show, or what Martin called a "live-in censor."[124] NBC censors were definitely present throughout the show's run, as Schlatter remembered *Laugh-In* having "censors up the wazoo."[125]

Many of *Laugh-In*'s best-known catchphrases serve as examples of ways in which the writers either defied censors or found tricks to adhere to the rules. One such phrase, which became a hallmark of the show, was 'sock it to me.' In this bit, members of the cast would say "sock it to me" and then receive a prank-type response, like a bucket of water thrown in their face. The 'sock it to me' sketches originated from Aretha Franklin's song "Respect."[126] The phrase had sexual connotations, and producer George Schlatter even told the show's writers, "I don't think they're going to let you say [sock it to me] on television."[127] "They" presumably referred to the network's censors, emphasizing their presence on the show and during the writing process. After some convincing, though, NBC let the piece run, and "sock it to me" soon became a staple of the show. One of the other well-known sayings was "Look that up in your *Funk and Wagnalls*," usually with an emphasis on the 'F.' While it sounded as if the cast members were

---

[123] Dick Martin, "Dick Martin," interview by Karen Herman, Television Academy Foundation, September 25, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/dick-martin.
[124] Ibid.
[125] George Schlatter, "George Schlatter," interview by Dan Pasternack, Television Academy Foundation, March 6, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-schlatter.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.

about to curse, they were just referencing the name of an encyclopedia.[128] The saying was logical, but as Schlatter said, "long 'Fs' make people nervous."[129] Writers were calling attention to a real reference book and not making one up for effect, which gave network censors little ground to contest the phrase.

The show would not hesitate to reference its differences with the NBC censors on air. During the season two premiere, Rowan and Martin had a conversation about one of *Laugh-In*'s catchphrases: "you bet your sweet bippy."[130]

> Rowan: Well, I guess you're looking forward to a good season?
> Martin: You bet your sweet bippy I am.
> Rowan: I forgot to tell you; the network doesn't want you to say sweet bippy anymore.
> Martin: I can't bet my sweet bippy anymore?
> Rowan: You can bet anything you like, except your sweet bippy. You'll have to think of another word.
> Martin: [chuckling] I got it.
> Rowan: Better let me hear it first.
> Martin: [whispers to Dan]
> Rowan: On second thought, stick with your bippy.[131]

By expressly referencing the network's censors in this dialogue, Rowan and Martin effectively minimized NBC's control of their language.

Sometimes the show could get jokes past the network simply because censors did not understand the joke or the wording it used. Martin recounted that *Laugh-In* was able to air jokes about marijuana several times because the censors were not familiar with the slang for the drug. One joke went as follows: "Last week, for the first time in its history, the United Nations has agreed on every subject for every country, and they are still looking for the person who put the

---

[128] Charles Earle Funk, *Funk & Wagnalls New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language,* Britannica World Language ed. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1959.
[129] George Schlatter, "George Schlatter," interview by Dan Pasternack, Television Academy Foundation, March 6, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-schlatter.
[130] *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* categorizes the word bippy as 'US slang' and defines it as follows: "used euphemistically for an unspecified part of the body; generally understood as equivalent to *butt* or *ass*."
[131] *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, season 2, episode 1, written by Paul Keyes, September 16, 1968.

grass in the air conditioner."[132] Martin recalled the censors asking, "What's funny about grass in an air conditioner?"[133] The writers acted as if the censors simply did not understand the humor of weeds and sod ending up in the UN's air conditioning system.[134] The joke made it to air.

Remembering another joke that relied on wordplay, Martin later chuckled as he recalled, "I think we got away with this one."[135] The skit featured Martin and cast member Goldie Hawn dressed in Hawaiian shirts and wearing leis as they prepared to disembark a cruise ship. As they were leaving, the ship's captain informed the couple that it is Hawaiian tradition to "throw your lei" overboard as you leave. Martin's character "picked Goldie up and threw her over the side."[136] Wordplay was a consistent theme in *Laugh-In*'s jokes, which often allowed writers to dupe the censors into approving jokes they did not understand.

Laugh-In's writers had another successful tactic they used when NBC was hesitant about the claims some of the jokes made. For example, after the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill, the writers' room wanted to air a joke about President Nixon's oceanfront residence in San Clemente, California, over 150 miles down the coast. NBC, however, said that "[the joke] was just too mean," according to Schlatter.[137] To appease the censors' concerns, the writers prefaced the joke with a phrase that they would use in similar situations to distance themselves from the claim they were about to make. It ultimately read, "There's no truth to the rumor that offshore drilling will cease when the oil slick reaches San Clemente."[138] This version of the joke made it past the censors.

---

[132] Dick Martin, "Dick Martin," interview by Karen Herman, Television Academy Foundation, September 25, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/dick-martin.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] George Schlatter, "George Schlatter," interview by Dan Pasternack, Television Academy Foundation, March 6, 2002, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/george-schlatter.
[138] Ibid.

The fact that a joke about Nixon made it to air was remarkable for two reasons. First, the president had close ties to one of the show's writers, Paul Keyes. Nixon befriended Keyes during one of his appearances on Jack Paar's program, where Keyes served as a writer and producer.[139] The two men's friendship would prove lasting, as Keyes became an advisor and close personal friend in the following years. During Nixon's 1962 bid for the California governorship, Keyes took a brief hiatus from Paar's show to help with the campaign. Nixon wrote a letter to Paar expressing "my deep appreciation for making it possible for Paul to spend as much time as he has with us. Believe me, he has made a great contribution to our cause."[140] While Nixon did not win the election, he continued to rely on Keyes's advice when he ran for President six years later.

While Nixon was on the campaign trail in 1968, Keyes was busy heading the writers' room at *Laugh-In*. Gearing up for the show's season two premiere in the fall of that year, Keyes suggested that Nixon make a guest appearance on the show. Despite being cautioned against doing the show by his political advisors, Nixon trusted Keyes' opinion enough to follow through with his appearance. The season's premiere played off of what had become a hallmark of the show—the 'sock it to me' routine. The bit manifested itself in the show as virtually the entire cast saying "sock it to me" and having a bucket of water thrown in their faces, being bombarded with ping pong balls, or something of the sort. The last cast member in the chain of "sock it to mes" was Judy Carne, who, after facing the wrath of a water bucket herself, answered a phone call supposedly from New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. She responded, "I don't think we can get Mr. Nixon to stand still for a 'Sock it to me.'" Proving Carne wrong, the camera cut to

---

[139] Myrna Oliver, "Paul W. Keyes, 79; Comedy Writer and Producer for Classic TV Shows," *Los Angeles Times,* January 8, 2004.

[140] Letter; Richard M. Nixon to Jack Paar; October 21, 1962; Box 2, PPS 214; Wilderness Years: Series V: Appearance File: Correspondence to Jack Paar Show; Richard Nixon Pre-Presidential Materials (Laguna Niguel); Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA.

and featured a pre-recorded close-up of the presidential candidate against a drab background. Nixon then uttered the four words "Sock it to me."[141]

Nixon did not get the routine bucket of water thrown in his face, but neither did he say the line as was expected. His version sounded more like "Sock it to *me*?"[142] While the delivery of the line warranted some laughs, many of *Laugh-In*'s cast members also credit the appearance as helping Nixon win the 1968 election. Martin said of the President's appearance, "If you recall, Mr. Nixon only won by one million votes. A lot of people have accused us [of assuring his victory.]"[143] No solid proof exists on how *Laugh-In* influenced the numbers but given the show's wide viewership it likely gave much of the country exposure to the politician in a comedic light.

Throughout his tenure at *Laugh-In*, Keyes continued to help Nixon's image by controlling the jokes about the President. Two of the season's new writers, Lorne Michaels and Hart Pomeranz, remembered that "every one of their efforts to crack wise at Richard Nixon's expense was cut short by Paul Keyes; even when the team managed to slip an anti-Nixon joke into the script, it would be neutered by the older staffers before it made it to the air."[144] With this in mind, it seems like the joke about the Santa Barbara Oil Spill and Nixon's San Clemente estate should have never made it to air. It did, though, demonstrating the power a few prefacing words, like "There's no truth to the rumor," had in *Laugh-In*'s writers' room.

The other element that made a joke directed toward Nixon rather daring at the time was the fate of *Laugh-In*'s CBS counterpart, *Comedy Hour*. After CBS cancelled *Comedy Hour* in 1969, rumors surrounding the reasoning for its demise began swirling around the nation. Some worried that other comedy shows would tone down their content to appease Nixon, but when

---

[141] *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In,* Season 2, episode 1. Directed by Gordon Wiles. Written by Paul Keyes. National Broadcasting Company, 16 September 1968.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Dick Martin, quoted in Hal Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 168.
[144] Erickson, *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank*, 170.

Laugh-In premiered its third season, and the first episode following *Comedy Hour's* cancellation, *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould breathed a sigh of relief. He wrote in the *Times*, "In the uproar last spring over the cancellation of the Smothers Brothers there was talk that this season would bring pussyfooting to accommodate Washington. Perhaps so, but it wasn't detectable last night in the fall return… of "Laugh-In."[145]

Expectation that the federal government would—and could—censor television programs did not stop with the Nixon Administration. In March 1971, one of *Laugh-In*'s episodes dedicated a portion of its show to poking fun at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its director, J. Edgar Hoover. The montage began with a character, played by Martin, coming home from work and asking his wife what she made for dinner. When she said dinner was a secret, the husband responded, "Good. I'll invite J. Edgar over; it's his favorite dish." At that moment, the phone rang, and Martin picked up a (presumably bugged) flower from the vase behind him. On the phone was Hoover, aware of the couple's conversation, calling to let them know he would not be able to make it to dinner.[146] Jokes, one-liners, and skits continued along this vein, criticizing Hoover and the FBI for the next six minutes.

Starting that night, however, the FBI began receiving calls from concerned citizens over *Laugh-In*'s material that evening. A letter written the next day read, "I believe the show was in extremely poor taste and an insidious propaganda effort to undermine the public's confidence in you and the F.B.I… I don't know what, if anything, can be done about this sort of thing but I am beginning to be awfully curious about what sort of Americans, if such they be, own these television companies."[147] Questioning the network's allegiance to the country, this concerned

---

[145] Jack Gould. "TV: 'Laugh-in' Dispels Doubt of Timorous Season." *New York Times,* Sep 16, 1969.
[146] *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, season 4, episode 25, March 9, 1971.
[147] Letter to J. Edgar Hoover, March 8, 1971, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In TV Show" file, FBI Vault, vault.fbi.gov.

citizen evoked sentiments reminiscent of McCarthyism. The author of this letter also inquired if something could 'be done' with the material that targeted an American agency, hinting at the possibility of censorship from a federal level. About a week later, the FBI sent a response signed by Hoover, which read, "I can readily understand the concern which prompted your letter… however, the FBI has no control over the material utilized by the mass media."[148] These were important words coming from the director of the FBI, especially since Hoover often went after his critics. The letter nonetheless affirmed the notion that, in *Laugh-In*'s case at least, censorship operated on a network level without interference from federal agencies.

Laugh-In battled with censors constantly during its tenure on NBC. Unlike its predecessor *TW3* and its CBS counterpart *Comedy Hour*, however, *Laugh-In* writers often successfully navigated around or worked with NBC censors to push their jokes to air. Writers took advantage of wordplay and learned to phrase jokes in certain ways to avoid controversy with the network censors. Paul Keyes's close relationship with Nixon also gave the show a leg up, whereas *Comedy Hour* possibly met its demise due to jokes at the President's expense. Overall, *Laugh-In* was an important fixture in the landscape of comedy, not only because of its topical jokes, satirical nature, and rapid pace but also because it found a way to maintain its cutting-edge humor while complying with NBC's censors.

[148] Letter from J. Edgar Hoover, March 8, 1971, "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In TV Show" file, FBI Vault, vault.fbi.gov.

Conclusion

These television programs—*That Was the Week That Was, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour,* and *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*—not only pushed comedic boundaries on television in the 1960s, but also demonstrated the ways in which censorship affected the genre. A general understanding that censorship would not be perceived well in a country known for its freedom of speech did not stop censors from editing and deleting material. While there was often nudging from politicians, advertisers, and affiliate stations, censorship notably came from the network level at the end of the day. The ways in which these shows and their writers responded to censorship often played a hand in their respective successes.

TW3 proved there was a market for political humor and satire in the United States. While there exists little evidence of NBC explicitly censoring the show, the network took actions like moving *TW3*'s timeslot and preempting episodes with other content effectively limiting the program's material. NBC's efforts, coupled with those of affiliates and advertisers, set a precedent for the censoring of *TW3*'s comedic material. The show paved the way for programs like *Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In* later in the decade.

While both *Comedy Hour* and *Laugh-In* faced censorship and pushback for their often-political jokes, two factors decided their ultimate fates: the ways in which each show responded to censorship and their relationships to the Nixon White House. The Smotherses often took a strong and, at times, retaliatory approach—publishing skits in the *New York Times*, fighting tooth-and-nail to get jokes to air, and eventually taking CBS to court over the show's cancellation. On top of their tendency to defy the network, the siblings' staunch stance against the Vietnam War and overtly liberal jokes supposedly angered Nixon—to the point where he played a hand in the show's abrupt ending.

Laugh-In, on the other hand, took a different approach when it faced censorship. Instead of fighting with censors outright, the show's writers employed clever wordplay and used purposeful phrasing to push their jokes past NBC's censors. *Laugh-In*'s writers' room had another powerful tool in its arsenal—the influence of Paul Keyes. As a friend of and advisor to Nixon, Keyes ensured that the program remained in the president's good graces. These factors allowed *Laugh-In* to sustain its wit and humor in the face of network censorship.

When it comes to the status of comedy (and more particularly, sketch-comedy) on television today, many programs have *TW3*, *Comedy Hour*, and *Laugh-In* to thank for paving the way. Most notably, NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL)* has remained a fixture in the realm of late-night comedy since its 1975 debut. *SNL* can trace its roots back to all three of these shows. The clearest influence is that of Lorne Michaels, who got his start as a writer on *Laugh-In*. Michaels created and produced *SNL* and remains the show's executive producer to this day. He no doubt learned from and leveraged his experience on *Laugh-In* to shape *SNL* into the program it is today. Buck Henry and Steve Martin—who wrote on *TW3* and *Comedy Hour* respectively—have both hosted several episodes of the NBC program. The format of the show—fast-moving sketches, topical content, and a satirical news segment—is reminiscent of these three programs. *SNL* even films in the same location—studio 8H in 30 Rockefeller Plaza—that *TW3* did in the early 1960s.[149]

Saturday Night Live has been on the air for 45 years—over four times longer than the tenure of *TW3*, *Comedy Hour,* and *Laugh-In* combined. Michaels likely drew from lessons learned at *Laugh-In* to assure that *SNL* tactfully handled any differences that might arise with NBC censors. Not only has *SNL* been successful enough amongst its viewers to remain on NBC

[149] Buck Henry, "Buck Henry," interviewed by Jenni Matz, Television Foundation Academy, February 26, 2009, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/buck-henry.

for over four decades, but it has also remained in the good graces of almost every president in office during its tenure. The show has impersonated each president since Gerald Ford, the country's leader at the time of *SNL's* debut.

Played by Chevy Chase, *SNL*'s President Ford was a bumbling klutz. There was not much truth to this presentation of the president. The press happened to capture Ford tripping as he boarded Air Force One, but outside of that incident the president was not known to be particularly clumsy. Republican operative James Baker said, "No one who knew the president ever quite understood [*SNL*'s] impersonation of him as a genial dolt who stumbled over doorsteps and big words… Unfortunately, the caricature—particularly the physical humor—took on a life of its own."[150] Even though the impersonation was not rooted in the truth, Ford played along. In fact, Chase hosted the 1976 Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner—what is today known as the White House Correspondents' Association. That night, Ford began his speech by dropping a stack of papers, much like his *SNL* counterpart would be expected to do. He began his remarks, "Good evening. I'm Gerald Ford." The President then turned and pointed to Chase and said, "and you're not!"[151]

Nearly 40 years later, President Obama also shared the stage with one of his impersonators, Keegan-Michael Key, at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. Perhaps both Ford and Obama understood appearing alongside comedians often made for good optics. Even if that was not their main intention, they both underscored the undeniable relationship between politics and comedy. In the 1960s, when political comedy began to make its way on television, political satire and comedy was not always welcomed. It was shows like *TW3*,

---

[150] James Baker quoted in Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W.W. Norton), 37.

[151] Gerald Ford, Box 26, "3/25/76 - Remarks at a Dinner for Members and Guests of the Radio and Television Correspondents Association" of the President's Speeches and Statements: Reading Copies at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

Comedy Hour, and Laugh-*In* that paved the way for programs that followed. These sketch-comedy shows set a precedent for satire on American television and provided examples—both good and bad—for how to challenge network censors. Perhaps more importantly, though, these programs proved that those fights against censors were worthwhile, for comedy and satire resonate with American audiences.

Bibliography

Archival Material

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.
Presidential Papers

FBI Vault. vault.fbi.gov.
"Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In TV Show" File

Film and Television Archives, University of California, Los Angeles.
John H. Mitchell Television Collection

Gerald Ford Presidential Library and Museum.
President's Speeches and Statements

National Comedy Center, Jamestown, New York.
Tommy Smothers Collection

Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.
Pre-Presidential Materials

Television Academy Foundation. interviews.televisionacademy.com.
"The Interviews"

Public Documents

1996 Democratic Presidential Primary Results. State of New Hampshire.
https://sos.nh.gov/1996DemPresPrim.aspx.

Communications Act of 1934, U.S. Code 47 (1934), § 51.

Television Broadcasts Posted Online

CBS Evening News. "50 years ago: Walter Cronkite calls for the U.S. to get out of Vietnam."
February 27, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn2RjahTi3M.

Historic Films Stock Footage Archive. "Lenny Bruce on the Steve Allen Show April 5, 1959."
YouTube video, 13:04. November 2, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3Q
gxmiBfNY.

"President Obama Remarks at 2015 WHCA Dinner." C-Span. April 25, 2015.
https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4535549/president-obama-remarks-2015-whca-dinner.

Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In. National Broadcasting Company, 1967-1973. Accessed on Amazon Prime Video.

Other Online Materials

"Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In: Awards and Nominations." The Television Academy. www.emmys.com/shows/rowan-and-martins-laugh.

"Winners & Nominees." Grammy.com. Accessed December 5, 2019. https://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/winners-nominees/139.

Journalistic Sources

Bloomberg News
Chicago Tribune
Los Angeles Times
New York Times
Wall Street Journal
Washington Post

Books

Bianculli, David. *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. 1st Touchstone Hardcover ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

Curtis, James. *Last Man Standing: Mort Sahl and the Birth of Modern Comedy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.

Erickson, Hal. *From Beautiful Downtown Burbank: A Critical History of Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, 1968-1973*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000.

Heale, M. J. "The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography." *Reviews in American History* 33, no. 1 (2005): 133-52. Accessed March 20, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/30031497.

Kercher, Stephen E. *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Kruse, Kevin M. and Julian E. Zelizer. *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2019.

Martin, Steve. *Born Standing up: A Comic's Life.* 1st Scribner Hardcover ed. New York: Scriber, 2007.

Nachman, Gerald. *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.

Pondillo, Robert. *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.