



Everything Jersey

Jersey guy Jon Stewart has been flexing his power of persuasion, but where does he go from here?

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By **Dave D'Alessandro**/Star-Ledger Columnist

CNN PHOTO

Jon Stewart, left, delivered a blistering criticism to Tucker Carlson on CNN's "Crossfire" in 2004, calling Carlson and his co-host "partisan hacks."

"If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you."

— **Oscar Wilde**

We're still not sure whether this should be filed under Coincidence, Providence or Irony, but all these years later, we have a nagging suspicion that Tucker Carlson was mostly right.

His mistake, obviously, was confronting his guest in the manner of a whiny, irredeemable prig, so Jon Stewart was exercising his wiseguy rights to torpedo

Carlson's bow-tied career before they hit the first commercial.

Stewart had gained some fame as a young comedian and was the host of "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" for five years by the time he appeared on CNN's "Crossfire" way back in 2004, but now he was about to crystallize a new role in his career. Carlson wasn't entirely wrong when he asserted that Stewart wasn't using his talent and platform as cogently as he could during those occasions when a figure of prominence (in this particular case, presidential candidate John Kerry) occupied the seat next to him, with cameras rolling.

The problem, of course, is that poor Tucker was pitifully ill-equipped to deal with Stewart, who seemed grateful for being the object of such journalistic contempt:

"Didn't you feel you got the chance to interview the guy, why not ask him real questions ... instead of sucking up to him?" the co-host snorted, as he sprinted blindly toward career suicide. "You need to get a

job in a journalism school, I think."

As you probably remember, Stewart's reply marked the first trenchant appraisal of the cable news dominion, and it could be distilled to one sentence: "It's interesting that news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity," he said.

His full rejoinder went on for 12 memorable minutes. It was the kind of lecture you might expect from a guy from Jersey, even one from sleepy Lawrence Township — an extraordinary combination of erudition and pie-in-the-face impudence.

But that doesn't mean Tucker Carlson was wrong.

Maybe his prissy quibble contained just a trace of clairvoyance.

Maybe he unknowingly prophesied the ascent of a TV giant whose show at the time was back-to-back with puppets making crank phone calls.

Because it is now undeniable: Since Stewart allowed Carlson to be hoisted by his own petard, the influence of "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" in television, pop culture, public discourse, elections and legislation itself has essentially soared.

You can't do that just by defaming the genre of punditry, which was once his chief aim. You do this by adopting the media's role as "the citizen's surrogate," as Tom Brokaw called him. And it is a job that Stewart takes seriously, even if the comparisons to Cronkite and Murrow probably induce nausea and inspire the occasional spit-take.

Yet his escalating impact raises a question that we've been grappling with for months now: If he has already evolved from satirist to quasi-journalist to public advocate to the "Most Trusted Man in America" in roughly five years, where is Jon Stewart going, and what exactly do we want from him?

If you've read this far, it is clear that you like your political news served raw, with a side of blackened comedy. Amen. Full disclosure: We actually have a recurring fantasy, one in which a Nixon of the Left wins the White House and starts his initial press conference by pushing a lectern button that opens a Dr. Evil trapdoor in the briefing room, dropping everyone into a pool of hungry vipers and flesh-eating lizards. But, you know, that would be wrong. Bwaa-ha-ha-ha-ha.

That essentially sums up our attitude toward TV coverage in general and beltway types in particular, which explains why we are drawn to Stewart. We cheer — silently or otherwise — when he describes reporters as performers in a "managed, theatrical farce" or "partisan hacks." We agree when he defines their creation as the "24-hour, politico pundit perpetual panic conflictinator."

Sometimes it feels like he's all we have. As "The Daily Show" matured in the Dubya decade — sobered by a terrorist strike in Stewart's own ZIP code, two wars, a global economic catastrophe, the incurable

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constipation of our government and the most seismic shift in media infrastructure since the dawn of television — he filled the vacuum left by a press corps that somehow grew more incurious, vain and strident in its blind pursuit of market share.

With nowhere else to go, we turned to Stewart, as if he were the only physician who can cure a late-stage cancer in the American body politic.

And after years of deflecting all attempts to define what his show represents, glibly dismissing most requests for self-analysis, he gradually has started to relent.

Bill Moyers, March 2007: "I don't know whether you are practicing an old form of parody and satire or a new form of journalism."

Stewart: "Neither. (It is a) new form of desperation."

That's his motivation, anyway. As for his job, "There has been a form of me around forever — a comedian who, with political and social concepts, criticizes them from a haughty yet ultimately feckless perch," as he said to MSNBC's Rachel Maddow in November. "The box that I'm in has always existed."

We've been content with having political and worldly satirists in that box for more than a century, which is why it seems ludicrous to ask any more from him. He is, after all, merely a comedian, a descendent of Mark Twain and Will Rogers and other humorists and social critics who lampooned isolationism and imperialism and corporatism and whatever "-ism" obsessed us at the time.

So it feels wrong to ask him to do another job. Stewart may be attentive and accommodating, but he also can turn vicious at the first hint of hypocrisy, bless his Jersey soul.

We rely on him to eviscerate CNBC host Jim Cramer and the other hyperventilating blowhards who fill the economic bubble with their hot air, because nobody else seems willing to hold them accountable.

We depend on him to expose stooges such as Betsy McCaughey — aka the Angel of Death Panels — and forcing her resignation from Cantel Medical of Little Falls inside of 24 hours.

We count on him to reduce John McCain to a state of rambling incoherence, challenging his support of the Iraq troops when it's his ilk that put our kids in stop-loss, voted down the GI Bill and allowed Walter Reed Army Medical Center to crumble.

We need Stewart to remind the president that he still hasn't closed Gitmo, still allows lobbyists to run amok, still hasn't pulled out of Iraq, still hasn't ended no-bid contracts and that he screwed up the health care debate.

Stewart continues to insist that he is not "in the game," as he said to Maddow, but that is only true in this regard: He is the only mainstream interviewer who has no interest in attending Georgetown cocktail
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parties.

Otherwise, his bona fides stretch from Manhattan to D.C., and his influence on public policy is now undeniable. He was credited with busting the Republican filibuster over the Zadroga Bill, which provided medical help for 9/11 first responders.

He and "Daily Show" correspondent Kristen Schaal led the blowback that initially shamed House conservatives such as Rep. Chris Smith (R-4th District) into suppressing their contempt for rape victims with their craven phrasing of the No Taxpayer Funding For Abortion Act, before Republicans rewrote it when no one was looking to reinsert that abortions in sexual assault cases would be funded only for victims of "forcible rape" — a redundancy as feeble-minded as "congressional duplicity."

And he summoned a quarter-million people to the National Mall, and 4 million others online, just before last November's midterm elections without even telling them what the gathering was going to be about.

Even before these events, most of us liked him just as he was. The annual Time Magazine reader poll for Person of the Year rated Stewart second behind Julian Assange. AskMen.com, one of the world's most popular websites (partly owned by News Corp.), named Stewart the Most Influential Man of 2010 — well ahead of Obama, Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates.

He is clearly moving toward ... something. Even his enemies seem to anticipate it: No issue of the Weekly Standard goes by without John McCormack accusing Stewart of some liberal sin, which is that magazine's way of avenging all those nights Bill Kristol was savaged in front of 1.8 million viewers.

Right?

"I don't think he has to do anything other than what he's doing now," Jay Rosen, the renowned New York University journalism professor, replied. "You seem to assume that he needs to, wants to, has to keep getting bigger, but is that true?"

That's what we can't wrap our heads around, we told Rosen. A political movement is usually led by politicians and billionaires, so that's out. He's not going to form a coalition of Matt Taibbi bomb throwers, Glenn Greenwald eggheads and a few of those low-information saps that Bill Maher finds so repulsive.

But it doesn't seem likely that he'll be satisfied doing four shows a week and a coffee table book every other year, either.

"I thought the rally last fall was fascinating, because he gave himself the opportunity to emerge as something else, but then stepped back from it," said Dan Kennedy, a journalism professor at Northeastern. "People ended up wondering what it was really about — which is fine. I'd rather have a great 'Daily Show' and a so-so rally than a great rally and a so-so 'Daily Show.'"

"He makes good money for Comedy Central, he has creative freedom, he has cultural influence, he has a lot of fun doing what he's doing," Rosen agreed. "So I don't see why he has to graduate to another stage, or become something different."

Fine, but we reserve the right to remain conflicted. The planet is falling apart, and if Stewart is content to go on telling his yuks — something Al Franken couldn't do — that is his right. Maybe he is ensnared in that Oscar Wilde construct, fearful that if we stop laughing at his truth-telling, we'll kill him. Or maybe he'll just go back to deflecting all attempts to define him.

For now, we can accept that. But for the first time ever, we'd actually like to hear an opinion from Tucker Carlson. These days, he's nestled snugly in the Cato Institute, drawing a big check from the Koch brothers for his deep thoughts. Something tells us he's never going to return that call.

Dave D'Alessandro is a Star-Ledger columnist.

JON STEWART TIME LINE

Nov. 28, 1962 — Jonathan Stuart Leibowitz is born. Grows up in Lawrence Township, N.J.

1980 — Graduates from Lawrence High School.

1984-86 — After graduating from William and Mary, he lives in New Jersey, working a series of jobs including bartender, busboy and government numbers cruncher.

1986 — Moves to New York City to break into comedy club circuit.

Oct. 25, 1993 — Launches MTV talk show "The Jon Stewart Show." (Canceled June 23, 1995.)

Jan. 11, 1999 — Debuts on the newly retitled "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," dubbing itself "the most trusted name in fake news."

Sept. 15, 2003 — Hosts Sen. John Edwards, who announces his presidential run, the first such proclamation on a comedy show.

Oct. 15, 2004 — Guests on CNN's combative "Crossfire," criticizing the state of television journalism. He pleads with hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala to "stop hurting America." This exchange becomes widely viewed on the internet and a topic of much media discussion. (Three months later, CNN cancels "Crossfire.")

March 12, 2009 — Decrying the media's poor reporting on Wall Street during the economic crisis, he rips into guest Jim Cramer of CNBC for putting entertainment above journalism. The episode has 2.3 million total viewers. The next day, the show's website has its highest traffic of the year.

Oct. 27, 2010 — Hosts President Obama, the first sitting U.S. president to appear on the show.

Oct. 30, 2010 — Co-hosts “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” with fellow Comedy Central star Stephen Colbert on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., drawing more than 200,000 three days before midterm elections.

Dec. 16, 2010 — Culminates campaign to encourage Senate to pass the filibustered James Zadroga 9/11 act by hosting four 9/11 first responders. Six days later it passes, and the White House and political news media credit Stewart for helping.

"THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART"

Awards and honors

- Jon Stewart and “The Daily Show” have received 24 Emmy Award nominations and won 13, including for “Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music or Comedy Program” (six times) and “Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Series” (seven).
- In 2001, “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” received the prestigious Peabody Award for excellence in its “Indecision 2000” campaign coverage and again in 2005 for “Indecision 2004.”
- The show also has been honored by the Television Critics Association for “Outstanding Achievement in News and Information” in 2003 and 2005, defeating traditional news shows in the category.
- The show’s success helped spawn “The Colbert Report,” hosted by “Daily Show” alum Stephen Colbert, in 2005. Stewart is the co-creator and executive producer of the series.
- Stewart was named “Entertainer of the Year” for 2004 by Entertainment Weekly and was honored as “New York Entertainer of the Year” by Variety. Stewart was also named to the inaugural Time 100 list of the world’s most influential people.

Prominent guests

As host of “The Daily Show,” Stewart has interviewed such political and entertainment luminaries as:

President Obama

Vice President Joe Biden

Former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton

Sitting senators Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain, John Kerry and Robert Menendez

Sitting cabinet members Margaret Spellings, Janet Napolitano, Kathleen Sebellius, Lisa Jackson

Other sitting government leaders Nancy Pelosi, Jon Corzine, Michael Bloomberg

Former government leaders Colin Powell, Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul O'Neill, Alan Greenspan, Christie Whitman, Edward M. Kennedy, Bill Bradley, Newt Gingrich, Rod Blagojevich

Current and former foreign leaders King Abdullah II (Jordan), Tony Blair (Great Britain), Pervez Musharraf (Pakistan), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Vicente Fox (Mexico)

Celebrities Bruce Springsteen, Howard Stern, Barbara Walters, Ringo Starr, Tom Cruise, Halle Berry, Meryl Streep, George Clooney, Jon Bon Jovi, Russell Crowe, Tom Hanks, Bob Costas, Bill O'Reilly, Jerry Seinfeld, Neil Young, Michael Moore, Kurt Vonnegut, Wynton Marsalis, Dan Rather, Heath Ledger and Tom Brokaw.

Business leaders Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and T. Boone Pickens

Sports stars LeBron James, Willie Mays, Bill Russell and Lance Armstrong

Nielsen Ratings

(February 2011)

1.6 million viewers (No. 1 late-night cable show in coveted 18-34 demographic)

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