



What P. J. O'Rourke Knew

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P. J. O'ROURKE once told me that he was not as good at making jokes as David Letterman's writers, and he didn't know as much about policy as the guys at the Cato Institute. *But!* He knew a lot more about policy than Letterman's writers, and he was a lot funnier than Cato's wonks. He could write trenchantly about politics and simultaneously be really funny, and that made him just about unique when he came along. You could get a take on politics that was scathingly on-target while snorting chocolate milk out your nose.

I'm not talking about "Washington funny." Before P. J., the 202 was a comedy Gobi where the micro-droplets of wit conjured up by hacks like Art Buchwald and "PBS wit" Mark Russell were received as gratefully as a downpour. Nor was O'Rourke the second coming of Hunter S. Thompson, to whom he was sometimes compared. O'Rourke did, like the earlier *Rolling Stone* political writer, have an affinity for the hilarious run-on insult — "In July 1988 I attended the specious, entropic, criminally trivial, boring, stupid Democratic National Convention — a numb suckhole stuffed with political bulk filler held in that place where bad malls go when they die." Thompson, like O'Rourke, was an excellent reporter, and he wrote in bold, slashing colors with exaggeration that became hyperbole that became absurdity, but O'Rourke not only made it rain acid, he wrote about politics with actual setup-punchline jokes, always aware that the truth is funny. "Washington is a fine place for journalists to live as well as to brown-nose," he wrote in *Parliament of Whores*. "It has plenty of the only kind of people who can stand journalists — other journalists — and plenty of the only kind of people journalists get any real information from — other journalists." To me, his heirs are the funniest political writers today — Jonah Goldberg, Kevin Williamson, and that guy at *Vox* who keeps saying we need to save the Republic by burning the Constitution. (Okay, that last one is funny mainly to me because I hear everything he writes in the voice of Ralph Wiggum.)

With his cigar and his cocktail, the Republican Party Reptile, as O'Rourke styled himself in a 1987 essay collection, repped the fun, libertarian conservatism that was as influential among young right-wingers as, say, Letterman was among young comics. "'Funny Republican' is an oxymoron in the public mind," he wrote then, and it was true. But after O'Rourke, how could

you be funny and *not* be a Republican? “People who worry themselves sick over sexism in language,” he wrote, “and think the government sneaks into their houses at night and puts atomic waste in the kitchen dispose-all cannot be expected to have a sense of humor. And they don’t.”

Democrats believe so many far-fetched things about how society works that they’re practically Scientologists. They think every American has to be punished, protected, or perfected by hideous monster programs dreamed up by sci-fi weirdos in the Frankenstein laboratories of Washington, D.C. Republicans don’t even need an affirmative credo (apart from loving our country) because we don’t think Washington should try to yank everyone’s strings in the first place. Following O’Rourke, all we would need to do is mock, scorn, deride, and generally aim dorsal methane emissions in the direction of those self-deluding liberal dorks.

I was a dopey, just-graduated-from college, whiny liberal dorkocrat when, having had some Ivy League misapprehensions beaten out of me in the Army, I started reading first George Will and then O’Rourke, who became a household name when *Parliament of Whores* became a bestseller in 1991. Will was the diligence of daily exercise; O’Rourke was the whooping after-party. A reformed ex-hippie Boomer, O’Rourke, like many Boomers, spoke our Gen X lingo. Trained at *National Lampoon*, he wrote like the cool anarchists of *Animal House* who scoffed at everything as a matter of principle. This was back when comedy was a shooting gallery rather than a self-pleasuring circle of Chuck Schumer stenographers. *What if the smartest people were wrong*, O’Rourke asked, and in 1991, after four years at Yale, I was ready to ask along with him.

Consider this paragraph about a typical politician, which demolishes about 47 seasons of Aaron Sorkin shows about fast-striding, noble-thinking guardians of the future:

He gets into the office early, reads newspaper clippings with his name highlighted, submits to a radio interview with Howard Stern, goes to a prayer breakfast and an ACLU lunch, checks opinion polls, meets with an NRA delegation, makes a friendly call to Al Sharpton, sits in the Inland Waterways Committee hearing room drawing pictures of sailboats and sea-gulls on a notepad, proposes National Dried Plum Week, votes “yea” (or is it “nay”?) on something or other (consult staff), exercises with the President, recovers from a faked charley horse after being lapped on the White House jogging track, watches the signature machine sign letters to constituents, returns a corporate campaign contribution to WorldCom, speaks at a dinner supporting campaign-finance reform, goes home, gets on the phone, and fund-raises until all hours.

Absurdity and stone-cold truth collide, and it’s a beautiful sight. O’Rourke took that jeweler’s eye and what-fresh-hell-is-this attitude to travel writing, to war zones, to the stock exchange, anything that was interesting, and (unlike Thompson, who slowly turned into a caricature of himself), he honored his gifts. Clearly, he was a disciple of H. L. Mencken, who similarly cultivated a metropolitan playboy contrarian persona and took a similar rakish and polysyllabic joy in diagnosing folly, but Mencken, whose heart was in Old Europe, was not a democrat. O’Rourke was. Which steered him away from the Democrats, that party of the people that doesn’t understand humans. “Where I grew up, you didn’t get a chance to live in poverty; you couldn’t afford it,” he wrote in *Parliament of Whores*. “What we managed to escape in 1966, in Squaresville, Ohio, was not poverty. We had that. What we managed to escape was help.” Not

only did he have common sense, he was as friendly and relatable as a Labrador retriever, and nearly as popular (one of his editors, Jonathan V. Last, relates that O'Rourke would speak to any editorial assistant or passing stranger as a trusted colleague).

Assuming the smart people are wrong may not work for you every day, but you can definitely fill your tank with it and go. Of Enron, in 2002, O'Rourke wrote, "Everyone blames too little regulation for the Enron mess, but maybe the culprit was too much." Of how corruption in politics works, he wrote, "A chilling characteristic of politicians is that they're not in it for the money." Of Bangladesh, he wrote, in *All the Trouble in the World*, "If overpopulation is something to worry about and if Bangladesh's degree of crowding constitutes overpopulation, then Fremont [Calif.] should be a worry, too. In fact, with 2,250 people per square mile compared to Bangladesh's 2,130, Fremont is slightly more worrisome."

O'Rourke's death yesterday was a sideways-knocker, a spirit-crusher, and an era-ender. Like Tom Wolfe, he pantsed the Left so relentlessly and so gleefully that progs really had no answer to him except, "Shut up." Predictably, some dumb clucks on Twitter tried to cancel him (right after God did that) on spurious grounds of racism, the blunt-force un-personing tool. But I suspect O'Rourke will be rediscovered by younger readers who will find his attitude endlessly adaptable. If something seems ridiculous to you, it probably is. Especially if it comes from the palavering invertebrates of the Potomac. When it came to ideas, he wrote, summing up the Right's creed of worldly skepticism, "the bigger, the worse."