



## Trump May Well Try to Clamp Down on Anti-Trump Humor; Can He?

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If *Saturday Night Live* gets under your skin, *Today Show* host Matt Lauer asked Donald Trump last week, why don't you "simply stop watching," instead of ranting about it on Twitter? A fair question, you'd think, but Trump responded by launching another rant: "There's nothing funny about it"; Alec Baldwin's impersonation is "really mean-spirited, [it's] very biased and I don't like it."

The president-elect has a lot of confused ideas about how the federal government works, but did he really imagine that one of the perks of the presidency is that no one's allowed to make fun of you?

Maybe so. The previous Saturday, when *SNL* aired a routine mocking Trump's Twitter Tourette's, Trump shot off an indignant tweet: "Unwatchable! ...the Baldwin impersonation just can't get any worse"; two weeks before that, Trump squawked: "totally one-sided, biased show—nothing funny at all. Equal time for us?"

It's become abundantly clear that Trump can't take a joke—which is an unsettling thing to learn about a man who's about to get his very own killer drone fleet. He's entitled to express his opinion. But the rest of us are allowed to worry—not just because the president-elect has repeatedly shown contempt for the First Amendment, but also because, in just over a month, this thin-skinned, easily provoked character will ascend to "the most powerful office in the world."

Of course, Trump won't be the first federal chief executive who thinks he deserves a "safe space" from mockery and criticism. Though we consider it one of our God-given rights as Americans to make fun of the president, our history shows that it's a right that was hard-won and not always well-respected.

Under the (thankfully) short-lived Sedition Act of 1798, for example, Americans could be fined or imprisoned for making "false, scandalous, and malicious" statements against "the President of the United States, with intent to defame... or bring [him] into contempt or disrepute." Among those prosecuted under the Act was New Jersey Republican Luther Baldwin (no relation to

Alec), who, during a 16-gun salute to John Adams at a parade in Newark, declared to his drinking buddies his hope that the cannon fire would hit the president in “his arse.”

By the early days of mass media, Americans’ right to insult the sovereign had long enjoyed formal legal protection. Even so, radio and television comedians tended to tread lightly, lest they offend the most powerful man in the world. In 1934, for example, comic Eddie Cantor felt compelled to ask FDR’s approval for a woefully tame radio bit wherein “Dr. Roosevelt” heals “Mrs. America”: “He’s got that magnetic personality—the minute he walks into a sickroom, the patient feels better already.” And in 1961, NBC executives spiked a skit about the Kennedys as “a matter of good taste.... We thought it would have been improper to have performers actually portraying the president and his wife.” As historian Kathryn Cramer Brownell explained in a recent article for *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, TV comedy producers of the era “carefully avoided controversy,” in part because the FCC, “with members appointed by the president—regulated broadcast licenses and set standards for programming.”

In 1962, a young stand-up named Vaughn Meader skyrocketed to instant fame as a JFK impersonator; his album *First Family* topped the Billboard charts for three months. The LP cover included a nervous—just kidding, folks!—disclaimer: “no one has more respect for the high offices and the people suggested here than [we do].” After taping a performance for a CBS variety show, Meader sent an obsequious telegram to JFK before it aired: “I impersonated you but I did it with great affection and respect. Hope it meets with your approval.”

Meader may have been right to worry: JFK didn’t care for the impression, and had aides look into what could be done to keep presidential impersonators off the airwaves. He even had his press secretary call the head of the Federal Communications Commission about it, but eventually concluded it would be wiser to put up with a bit of affectionate teasing.

The possibility of presidential retaliation loomed large in the minds of CBS network executives when the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* began to push the envelope on acceptable presidential mockery starting in 1967. The presidential impressions featured on that show, like comic David Frye, played a lot rougher than Vaughn Meader, and folk singer Pete Seeger’s anti-Vietnam song “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy”—with its thinly veiled dig at “the big fool,” President Lyndon Johnson—sparked a fight with the CBS brass. “It’s okay to satirize the president, as long as you do so with respect” one executive warned the Brothers. LBJ called CBS Chairman William S. Paley to complain about the show, and, despite its popularity, Paley pulled the plug on it shortly after Richard Nixon’s inauguration.

That culture of deference couldn’t survive Vietnam and Watergate, however. In the 1970s, as Americans learned about the massive abuses of executive power their presidents had committed, they embraced a more irreverent comic style.

*Saturday Night Live* was at the center of this cultural shift, showing that not only was it “okay” to satirize the president, but you needn’t necessarily “do it with respect.” A 1976 *SNL* skit on Nixon’s “Final Days” featured a drunken RMN (Dan Ackroyd) ranting at JFK’s portrait and hurling anti-Semitic slurs at Henry Kissinger (John Belushi). Harsh—but not far off from the real thing.

That year, Gerald Ford became the first president to perform the opening line: “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!”—pre-taped in the Oval Office to run on a show guest-hosted by his press secretary, Ron Nessen. Nessen had accepted the invitation to host, he said, to show that “the president could take a joke.” The show’s writers decided to test that proposition; as one of them put it: “The President’s watching. Let’s make him cringe and squirm.” That they did, by kicking the vulgarity up a notch, with parody commercials featuring a carbonated douche called “Autumn Fizz” and a jam called “Painful Rectal Itch.”

Still, in the end, Ford was glad he’d done it; a decade later, he’d defend the appearance as a way to defuse “any hint of ‘imperial’ trappings in connection with the presidency”; and while Chevy Chase’s portrayal of the president as a pratfalling spaz was sometimes embarrassing, “It was also funny,” Ford admitted.

Since the ‘70s, getting mocked on TV—sometimes to his face—has been a rite of passage for every president. Even the White House Correspondents Dinner, the annual confab where DC reporters suck up to the president, has its moments every decade or so: as in 2006, when Stephen Colbert served up “uncomfortably harsh mockery of President Bush and the press corps,” and 1996, when Bill Clinton had to suffer through Don Imus jabbing him over his multiple infidelities.

Presidential ridicule is therapeutic for a democracy. When we mock our rulers, we remind them—and us—that they’re mere mortals. They weren’t put on earth to solve all our problems, and they shouldn’t be given the power to try.

Does our incoming chief executive represent a threat—legally or otherwise—to the great American pastime of taking the bark off the president? Trump has certainly made it clear that, given the chance, he’d turn his prejudices into policy: He’s bloviated about “open[ing] up our libel laws” so public figures enjoy greater protection from rough treatment in the media. And where Richard Nixon schemed privately about using antitrust prosecutions to cow the media, Trump has made such threats openly: “believe me, if I become president, oh do they have problems,” he’s said of Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and the paper he owns, *The Washington Post*.

Still, the fact that Trump has blustered about going after his critics will make it harder for him to get away with using federal power to harass them. And he’d have to search pretty hard to get conservative justices who disagree with Supreme Court precedent holding that the First Amendment protects “vehement, caustic, and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials.” Criminal defense attorney and popular lawblogger Ken White concludes that Trump’s threats to revise libel law “should concern you as an attitude about speech, but not much as a policy agenda.”

Trump’s attitude toward criticism should also concern us because it suggests a resentful, hair-trigger temperament—quick to take offense, and ready to lash out. You’d like to think that anyone the country entrusts with the enormous, destructive powers of the presidency will be a coolheaded type who can resist provocation from tougher customers than Alec Baldwin. But, as Trump made clear on the campaign trail, he’s too sensitive even to laugh off a jibe about the size of his hands—and other extremities—from “Little Marco” Rubio. Last March, after the Florida senator cracked, “you know what they say about men with small hands?”, Trump rushed to

reassure the nation in the next GOP primary debate: “I guarantee you there's no problem” in that department. Oddly enough, it wasn't reassuring.

We have plenty to worry about as Trump's inauguration looms, but our right to mock the president will remain secure. Instead of ushering in a new era of respect for the presidency, President Trump is a sure bet to provide comics with plenty of new material. That, at least, is some consolation: we're going to need the laughs.

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