

P.J.'s politics: You want funny with that?

Veteran political humorist cracks wise, but he has a serious point.

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In P.J. O'Rourke's case, it's a genetic thing, being Republican and funny.

Home from college for Christmas break, rebelliously resplendent in the hippie fashions of the day — jean jacket with a red fish on it, shaggy hair — his grandmother said, "Pat, I'm worried about you. Are you becoming a Democrat?"

"Grandma!" O'Rourke said. "Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon are both fascist pigs! Of course I'm not a Democrat! I'm a communist!"

"At least you're not a Democrat," his grandmother said.

That exchange, which appears in O'Rourke's new book, "Don't Vote — It Just Encourages the Bastards," really happened, he swears. But the young O'Rourke wasn't really a communist.

"I was just a leaf blowing in the wind," O'Rourke said from New York. "I was not serious about stuff and I was trying to get laid. It was a matter of fitting in with the temper of the times. Kids love to fit in."

But sometimes, you just have to make your own way, and for O'Rourke that's meant sticking to the principles he grew up with and, along the way, gaining the distinction of having the most citations of any living writer in the "Penguin Dictionary of Humorous Quotations." From his days on the staff of, and as editor-in-chief of, National Lampoon to a long gig touring fearsome hellholes for Rolling Stone, the guy has spent much of his career writing for publications that gave his politics a pass as long as he was funny. And so he was. These days he's the H.L. Mencken Research Fellow at the Cato Institute, a regular panelist on National Public Radio's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me," a contributor to The Atlantic Monthly and The Weekly Standard, and a steadily productive author of best-selling books. (He's also had a side gig writing about cars.)

"Don't Vote" is O'Rourke's 14th book, and, he says, it was a hard one to write. It's a work of serious political theory with jokes, the result of a great deal of reading, research and sorting through his own thinking. Or as he puts it: "Having been a political commentator of one kind or another since 1970, it has occurred to me to ask, 'What the hell have I been talking about for forty years?' "

He has done this before, notably and recently with his meditation on Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations," a work of economic theory as weighty as an industrial refrigerator that O'Rourke digested down to a very amusing and accessible read. There's some Smith in his new book, too. O'Rourke's take is that Smith predicted the subprime crater more than 200 years before it happened.

The approach is the same in "Don't Vote." True, he cites "Peter Oliver's Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View," but his very first chapter is named for a three-word game played during "late-night giggle sessions at all-girls boarding schools." Two of the three words are "kill" and "marry," while the middle word is a profane term for what mommies and daddies do when they love each other very much. The idea is you have to pick three men and pick whom you'd kill, whom you'd marry and whom you'd, you know. O'Rourke then OKs the game with 1992 presidential candidates Ross Perot, Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush, then government policies.

You get the idea. The theoretical framework here are the concepts of power, freedom and responsibility and he draws a bead on people his age when meditating on the latter: "Has there ever been a generation — a nation —

a civilization — more determined to evade responsibility?"

Sometimes O'Rourke's thinking is complicated. He's only slightly less enthusiastic than Ted Nugent about guns, but when asked his interpretation of the Second Amendment he confesses, "I don't know. It might be the most badly written part of the Constitution." And here he is in the book, a little less serious:

"Guns don't kill people, votes do. If we were serious about reducing American deaths and property damage we wouldn't be arguing about gun control, we'd be arguing about vote control ... Nearly half of all Americans with a vote have used it in past elections, often with tragic results."

On embryonic stem cell research, he allows that scientists much smarter than he claim the work has great potential but defers to the pope on the matter and manages to crack a joke: "I'm given to understand that the frozen human embryos upon which the research will be conducted are 'leftovers,' but as a male of 63 the same can be said about me."

Surprisingly, for a small-government libertarian, O'Rourke concedes that pound for pound, dollar for dollar, the amount of government services most Americans get for their tax dollars is actually a good deal. At the same time, a news story about how it costs the government two cents to mint every new penny affirmed his suspicions about government's congenital incompetence so much that "I was hopping about with glee."

There's also a chapter, "a rant," as he put it, that he began working out on a plane after the 2008 presidential election, on where the right went wrong on matters of immigration reform, confusing legislation with morality, No Child Left Behind and more.

He's also watching with considerable interest the tea party movement, which wants ... something or other. O'Rourke traces the seeds of this populist discontent to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society or probably before and says the election of any "doctrinaire liberal" would have set it off, not just secret Muslim socialist Kenyan Barack Obama. Asked to name the worst thing about the current president, O'Rourke says, "The intellectual arrogance, especially if you match that with his very limited life experience. He hasn't earned his arrogance."

But these are confused and confusing times; maybe sometimes it does help to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. Will the tea partiers alienate independents and moderate Republicans, ensuring Democratic victories, or will the party in power suffer at the hands of the unquiet and unwashed masses? O'Rourke just can't say.

"I've been a reporter for too long to try to call that stuff," he said.

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