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The river of poison running through America's body politic

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The unexpected outcome of the US presidential election has produced its share of ironies. Conservatives, who spent their entire professional lives arguing for fiscal probity, have embraced Donald Trump's liberal spending plans intended to revamp America's crumbling infrastructure. Now they are arguing that if that is what the people want, that is what they ought to get.

Liberals, who for the last eight years kept silent as Barack Obama repeatedly, and often unconstitutionally, circumvented the US Congress in order to promote his progressive agenda, have suddenly rediscovered the virtues of the US Constitution and are now calling for checks on the power of the executive.

This, I suppose, is what happens when devotion to a party takes precedence over devotion to principles.

The gold medal in intellectual gymnastics occasioned by Trump's victory must surely go to the progressive comedian and late night talk show host Stephen Colbert. He has spent his career and made millions of dollars out of lampooning advocates of small government, only to realise that there is simply too much politics in the lives of ordinary Americans.

This column is devoted to the mind-bending hypocrisy of Colbert and others like him. But first, a little bit of background.

The Colbert Report was an immensely popular late night show that aired on Comedy Central from 2005 to 2014, when Colbert took over as the host of CBS's Late Night from the retired Dave Letterman.

In the Report, Colbert played a conservative know-nothing who parodied small government advocates with jibes like, "*If we don't cut expensive things like Head Start, child nutrition programs, and teachers, what sort of future are we leaving for our children?*" and "*Did you enjoy your meal? I should mention that, due to the recent government shutdown, none of the food tonight was inspected. In fact, that salmon appetizer wasn't actually smoked – it just swam too close to a Koch brothers' factory.*"

On the election night, as the certainty of the Hillary Clinton presidency slowly evaporated, Colbert got all serious and delivered a monologue on the sorry state of a deeply-divided American society. CBS called his monologue, “poignant.” Mother Jones went further, calling it both “poignant and deeply heartbreaking,” as well as “moving.”

According to Vox, it was an “*extraordinary monologue ... It wasn't a perfectly constructed monologue, but it felt honest, in a way TV rarely is ... The monologue was raw, unfocused, and strangely beautiful.*”

USAToday raved about how fans on Twitter loved it, citing a single tweet.

The Washington Post described it this way: “*Colbert finally signed off with a monologue that came off as improvised, from the heart and earnest.*” Bustle claimed that “*Though his words reflected his signature straight-faced humor, there was also a lot of truth to them.*”

So, what exactly warranted such praise from the mainstream media? Here is an extract.

“Now, I think we can agree that this has been an absolutely exhausting, bruising election for everyone and it has come to an ending that I did not imagine... By every metric, I mean, we are more divided than ever as a nation... Everybody feels that way. And not only that, more than half of Democrats say the Republican party makes them afraid, while 49 percent of Republicans say the same about the Democratic party. So both sides are terrified of the other side, and I think that's why the voting booth has a curtain so you have some place to hide after the election is over.

So how did our politics get so poisonous? I think it's because we overdosed, especially this year. We drank too much of the poison. You take a little bit of it so you can hate the other side and it tastes kind of good and you like how it feels and there's a gentle high to the condemnation. And you know you're right, right?

When I was a kid, we didn't think about politics this much... Politics used to be something we thought about every four years, maybe every two years if you didn't have a lot of social life... And I think the people who designed our democracy didn't want us in it all the time. Informed, yes. Politicking all the time, I don't think so. Not divided that way. They designed an election that was meant to confuse us and bore us a little bit. That's why the Electoral College exists.

But now politics is everywhere and that takes up precious brain space we could be using to remember all the things we actually have in common, so whether your side won or lost, we don't have to do this shit for a while.”

While superficially deep, the monologue exposes Colbert as ignorant of the intent of the Framers of the US Constitution and lacking in personal introspection (more of which later).

To start with, it was not the election that the Framers of the Constitution designed to be boring. The Framers wanted American politics to be boring by designing a form of government that allowed for a maximum amount of personal freedom consistent with the rule of law.

And when individual autonomy was not possible, the Founding Fathers reserved powers to the states, thereby heavily constraining the power of the federal government. As the 10th Amendment to the Constitution states, *“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”*

Americans are at each other’s throats because progressives, like Colbert, spent the last century undermining individual autonomy and the principle of federalism, thus ensuring that an ever-increasing number of deeply personal decisions undertaken by ordinary Americans are decided in Washington or are heavily influenced by the federal government.

Note that I am not making a value judgement with regard to those decisions.

From the perspective of social peace it is not too relevant whether one state allows school vouchers to be used in religious schools and another insists that they be used only in secular schools; whether one state allows abortions, while another bans them; whether one state mandates health insurance coverage, while another does not; whether one state should prohibit self-declared trans-gendered persons from using the bathrooms of their choice, while another allow it.

What is relevant to social concord is that Americans live in a massively diverse country, with the electorate divided not only along racial and gender lines, as progressives realize, but also along moral and religious lines, as conservatives appreciate.

Thus, one-size-fits-all decisions made at the highest level of government must, by necessity, turn politics into a zero-sum game, where someone’s win comes at someone else’s cost.

It is here that Colbert is not in the least introspective. As a progressive, he spent the last decade making fun of the advocates of small government. As a progressive, Colbert supports most government powers and programs intended to make all Americans conform to the liberal vision of a “good” life. Those whose preferences diverged from Colbert’s own were cannon fodder for his jokes.

So, Stephen, if you want to find the spring of the river of poison that runs through America’s body politic, you can start by looking in the mirror.

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