



## **P.J. O'Rourke on why Trump will collapse, Ann Coulter's a fraud, and how National Lampoon created modern comedy**

Andrew O'Hehir  
September 24, 2015

You learn an awful lot about contemporary American comedy from Douglas Tirola's documentary "Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of National Lampoon," including how much of it can be traced back to the legendary humor magazine founded by Henry Beard, Robert Hoffman and Doug Kenney in 1970. The Lampoon was intentionally confrontational and outrageous, attacking American complacency in all directions and without mercy. As becomes clear in the film, Lorne Michaels' NBC variety show "Saturday Night" (as it was originally called) was a Lampoon offshoot in all but name, importing the magazine's anarchic, satirical sensibility along with much of its talent.

Another thing that becomes clear – and looks startling from the vantage point of 2015 – is how exclusively white and male the Lampoon and its brand of humor were. The three founders had been editors at the Harvard Lampoon, after all, and essentially rebranded that ancient and stodgy undergraduate publication as the voice of a generation embittered by the Vietnam War, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the election of Richard Nixon and the rise and fall of the New Left. There were only a handful of women among early Lampoon staffers and contributors – one of whom jokes in the film that she got into the magazine the way Catherine the Great got into politics: "on my back." There were no visible people of color at all.

I'm not trying to undermine the near-apocalyptic bitterness and brilliance of a Lampoon contributor like Michael O'Donoghue, who was – or could have been, had he lived longer – one of the greatest innovators in the American comic tradition. O'Donoghue did not grow up in privilege and hadn't gone to Harvard, and that outsider quality, amid the clubbish context of the Lampoon, fueled his nihilistic humor. If anyone remembers him today, it's probably for the relentlessly downbeat character Mr. Mike he played on "Saturday Night Live," or his skits (if you want to call them that) in which banal pop-culture figures like Mike Douglas or Tony Orlando have steel needles plunged into their eyes.

When you see the material that O'Donoghue and others came up with for the Lampoon – no one would try to get away with his infamous "Vietnamese Baby Book" today, or his comic book called "First Homosexual Encounter" – it's like seeing all the supposedly outrageous satire of the last three decades compressed into a few years and one drug-enhanced New York magazine.

I lack the necessary contacts to interview O'Donoghue (who died in 1994, at age 54), so I got P.J. O'Rourke on the phone instead, from his home in New Hampshire. O'Rourke was another Lampoon outsider, the son of a car salesman who attended Miami University (the one in Oxford, Ohio) instead of Harvard. He was O'Donoghue's principal collaborator on the Lampoon's legendary "High School Yearbook Parody," and became the magazine's editor in the late '70s before striking out on his own as a pundit and humorist.

But let's be honest: I particularly wanted to talk to O'Rourke because he has long been identified as one of the few leading humorists on the conservative end of the political spectrum. I have frequently found his positions disagreeable, and I think he often reverts to clever quips in place of political arguments. (As he did, in fact, in our conversation.) But he's also very funny, and is generally willing to admit the validity or at least the possible coherence of other points of view, a quality sorely lacking on the contemporary right.

Since at least the mid-'80s, O'Rourke has tried to stake out a zone on the libertarian-conservative wing of the Republican Party. It might once have been accurate to describe that position as "embattled," but now, in a party eviscerated by antiabortion fanatics and gun nuts and thinly veiled racists – a party in danger of being devoured whole by Donald Trump – it barely exists at all. So maybe I wanted to gloat, or just to find out whether O'Rourke has any better idea about what's going on than I do.

**Of course the story of the National Lampoon is fascinating, P.J. But so is your story. For a good while there, at least for many people of my generation, you were the designated "funny conservative."**

Yeah, that was me. That was me and Ann Coulter, but she seems to have fallen off the bus.

**Indeed. Her degree of funniness has gone in some strange directions of late, I would say.**

I think that's put very kindly indeed. I just wrote a piece about her for the Weekly Standard — I wanted to write it for a conservative publication. I can only hope it saws about 6 feet off her legs. I just finished the edit last night so it'll be up on their website this weekend.

**You know, wherever I might have areas of disagreement with you – a lot of those, probably — I never suspected that you were faking it. I have suspected all along that Coulter was faking it. I think she's basically a performance artist or a prankster.**

Do you? She's such a relentless self-promoter that I think it hardly matters if she's sincere or not. To me, Al Franken is like that — well, all of us had a little bit of the same quality. I don't doubt Al's sincerity, but he has so relentlessly promoted himself that he's in the United States Senate! Al, you win! Especially given some of the things he has said, some opposition research would have been in order.

**Oh, they tried! Al basically said, "Yeah, I did cocaine when I was on 'Saturday Night Live.' What's your point?" I get where you're going with that, but the thing about Ann Coulter is that at some point she started to adapt these ludicrous, extreme positions, and it was entirely calculated. It was a strategic maneuver, almost like a rebranding.**

I think you're right about that. I mean, nuance went out the window. You can be dubious about the number of immigrants coming in the United States — legal, illegal or otherwise — without being rude about it. You could say, "Gee, this is putting a strain on our resources, so on and so forth." I happen to be a pro-immigrant person. As I said in my piece, she's from Connecticut, and she's very upset about immigrants. I'm willing to lend a sympathetic ear to people from Connecticut when it comes to immigrants — if they happen to own a tribal casino! My feeling is, unless you're Native American, you should just shut up about this. 'Cause you ain't from here.

**I was almost surprised she didn't embrace Scott Walker's idea about building a wall on the Canadian border. [Laughter]**

Yes, the Frost Curtain. Truly inspired.

**Coulter's embrace of Trump seems more than a little suspicious to me. That's a naked attempt to position herself as the craziest and most radical of all pundits. She's just surfing the wave.**

You're square on the money there, because anybody's embrace of Trump would feel suspicious. Unfortunately he's tall, so this joke wouldn't work on him: Someone once called Roman Polanski the 5-foot Pole you wouldn't touch anything with. There's a joke in there about Trump, trying to fight its way out!

**Well, Donald Trump is what I was leading up to, of course. Because all discussions of politics revolve around him.**

He is the sun, and we are but minor planets.

**At best. Or asteroids. As the editor of National Lampoon and, as I say, the designated funny conservative for so many years, you couldn't have dreamed up anything as nutty and improbable and frightening as the Trump candidacy, could you?**

No, no. Oh God, no. When I started covering this stuff, we were talking about Reagan and Bush 41. That era may have lacked a number of things, it may have lacked sense and brains and so forth and so on, but it didn't lack gravitas.

**More seriously, though — you're affiliated with the Cato Institute and you identify as a libertarian. And whether I agree with those positions or not, I can see it as a consistent and coherent ideology. How do you feel about the current Republican Party, which has no vestiges of consistent or coherent ideology? I mean, from your point of view, hasn't it gone off the rails?**

Well, just read the list of candidates. Just take a look at the printout of the list, just the last names. You'll look at that and say, "This isn't a list of presidential candidates! This is the worst law firm in the world!" This is a law firm that couldn't get Caitlyn Jenner off on a charge of identity theft from Bruce! I mean, this is hopeless. You can say pretty much the same thing about the Democrats too, but the list is only so long. They look more like a funeral home or an insurance brokerage.

**Yeah, I suppose so. Sanders, Biden and Clinton.**

I suppose that's a law firm too. A really boring one. Note that they've got the Jewish guy in there.

**You're determined to get yourself in trouble.**

I am, I am.

**You know, I have repeatedly insisted in what I write for Salon, which is strongly identified with the liberal, Democratic end of the spectrum, that there are honorable traditions within the Republican Party that the left should respect and take seriously.**

Well, there was winning the Civil War and ending slavery! All that stuff.

**Sure. But honestly, that was a totally different party, and a different country. Much more recently than that, we have the fact that the first African-American elected to the Senate was a Republican [Edward Brooke of Massachusetts], the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress was a Republican [Margaret Chase Smith of Maine]. But that tradition, whether you want to call it "Rockefeller Republican" or something else – that's gone now.**

It isn't so much the Rockefeller tradition. He was a bit of a slimeball. It's just a tradition of being thoughtful, for Pete's sake. People are going to disagree about this stuff, there's no easy answer. I just came across a terrific quote from Michael Oakeshott in his essay "On Conservatism." It's also a really rare example of Oakeshott being comprehensible. He said, "To be conservative is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the impossible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, the present laughter to the utopian bliss." Not bad, huh?

**Yeah, that's good enough that I realize I can't pick it apart in some facile way, at least. It almost sounds like Edmund Burke.**

Yeah. Well, I consider myself to be a Burkean to the soles of my shoes.

**Which I'm sure are very nice shoes! I have a lot of respect for that intellectual tradition. I think you have to. Burke's caution about the French Revolution was well-founded. Even if you incline toward the belief, as I do, that beheading the king and tearing everything down was a good start.**

I agree that's always a tempting position.

**When you see this movie, I think something becomes clear about the importance of National Lampoon in shaping the contemporary American sense of humor, and the entire landscape of comedy. Which should be fascinating for younger people who have quite likely never heard of the magazine, or that whole generation. When you look around and see Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert and all the late-night hosts, do you have the feeling that this is the world you guys made?**

Well, I don't know about me, in particular. I came along later, I wasn't a founder. But was it started by the National Lampoon as a whole? Yeah, that is enormously true. If the Lampoon was the root of the tree, the trunk would be named "Saturday Night Live." I should say two trunks, because the movie "Animal House" is another thing from which these branches rose. But the Lampoon is the root. I wish it was because of something intellectual for us to discuss, some sort of deep change in America or something you could write a fun article about. But it wasn't. It was just about money.

**I see. You're a Marxist!**

No. Or maybe yes and no. It was like this: Television and the movies took a long time to adapt. In the '70s, they were still coming to grips with the fact that they weren't the mass, mass, *mass* media that they had once been. There were more than three channels by then, HBO had launched. Everybody didn't go to the movies every single week. When they went to the movies, the movies were more like niche movies, they didn't appeal to everyone. You go back and you look at a violent, shoot-'em-up movie from the '50s, and it's still got a love scene. Because it's got to appeal to your mom!

So "Animal House" was a big success. Everybody in the movie and television business looked at "Animal House" and they said, "Whoa, did that make a lot of money! And boy, was that cheap!" Ditto "Saturday Night Live." That show seems like such a big deal now, but what do you suppose the budget was for "Saturday Night Live," versus one episode of "Hawaii Five-0"? That thing was so cheap! It was like: Hell, we got a piece of dead air on Saturday night, and we don't know what to do with it. Here's a really cheap way to fill it and we might make some money.

**Sure. I never thought about this before, but even the fact that it was live removed a certain level of production expenses.**

Of course, yeah. It's hectic as hell, but it's cheap. There was an economy of scale that made all of this possible, essentially. They looked at National Lampoon and said "Oh yeah, we can do that. We can do that and make a ton of more money than Lampoon ever did."

**What interests me about your period as the editor of National Lampoon, which was – can we say controversial?**

[Laughter] Yeah, we can.

**Every comedian, every satirist, needs a target. And National Lampoon originated in this era of Nixon and Vietnam and Watergate, where the American establishment seemed to be crumbling and made for an easy, almost automatic target. You came along a few years later, deeper into the '70s, and you sought out a different target, which was basically the counter-establishment. You wanted to target liberal piety and self-congratulation and "political correctness," even though we didn't use that word at that time. So in that sense you were way ahead of your time!**

Yeah. I mean, Lampoon was very much founded on the principle that everything was fair game. One of the best issues they ever did, and this was edited by Michael O'Donoghue, long before I was at the magazine, was their issue on hippies. It was absolutely hilarious.

**I remember that, or I suppose what I remember is seeing it much later. O'Donoghue was such a dark fucking genius.**

That he was. "Good news for vegetarians: Chickens are actually fast plants!" I was a hippie at the time, and I was laughing my ass off. People forget how earnest the '60s was, and the Lampoon was a good cure for that. But, yes, the dominant political atmosphere at the Lampoon was liberal to leftist. Some of us thought, well, you know, enough already with your pious certainty about everything. Yeah, we don't like Nixon either but, come on, there are objectionable people on the other side too.

**Who else fell into that camp, in the early Lampoon era?**

That would have been mainly me and John Hughes. Some of the freelancers.

**John Hughes was a right-winger? I mean, in a certain way that totally makes sense. And today, other than you and crazy, damaged Ann Coulter, who else is out there? Dennis Miller, God help him, seems to have flamed out.**

Really? I like Dennis.

**Oh, I think he can be funny. His filthy rant about why the suicide-bomber version of Paradise was a bad deal was hilarious, at least the first few times you heard it. But he hasn't found any kind of enduring niche.**

That's true, and I don't quite know why that is. I know him a little bit, and he doesn't seem hard to work with. But NFL football color commentator was not the right gig for him. Remember that?

**Of course. They tried Rush Limbaugh in that role too, which is hard to believe in retrospect.**

Yeah, that's right. Actually, I bet Rush was better at it, in a sense. I like Dennis, I thought what he did was great. But it was completely an intellectual look at football. I want to throw in something that someone said, it might have been Charles Krauthammer: "Why do intellectuals like baseball so much better than they like football?" The answer is, "Football is too hard to understand."

**That's awfully subtle for Krauthammer, who always looks on TV as if he had just eaten something unpleasant. But if you say so. Seriously though, isn't it frustrating that there are so few high-level humorists on your side of the aisle?**

No, it's not frustrating to me because it leaves the field wide open! It's great for me. But it's very bad for what I believe in. This is because I've come to know that there are a lot of people on my side of the political question, sort of, who privately have a very good sense of humor, and who do not put it to work publicly. I don't know why they insist on being po-faced on all this stuff.

**Who, for example?**

I would say that probably one of the best examples was Bob Dole. He was hilarious — and *mean!* He was great. I remember when he was ginning up to run, I sat down with some other conservative pundits and had dinner with him — about 10 of us or something. We had dinner over at some place on Capitol Hill, and he was just a fucking riot. We all thought, “This guy’s a shoo-in!” And then he goes on the stump and absolutely freezes up.

**Yeah, he was a terrible campaigner. Your crusty World War II grandpa. I mean, since Kennedy and Nixon, it’s been important for politicians to play well on TV. And one of the most important factors with Donald Trump is that he’s been hosting a TV show for 10 years, right? He’s a polished personality with a well-shaped persona. Isn’t that the thing that’s separating him from these other guys? I mean, look at Ted Cruz, who I understand is very intelligent and I know to be well educated. And he just comes off as this very intense and tense and mean person.**

That’s the truth. There’s a wealthy couple up here [in New Hampshire], who are very devoted to conservative causes. And one of things they do in the summers is to bring various politicians in to talk to local rich, old Republicans. I’m a junior member, I guess. I’ve got the “old” thing down. I’m working on the rich, but it may be a little late. Anyway, so the woman called me and said, “P.J., what do you think about having Ted Cruz up here?” And I said, “Geez, I don’t know. I don’t know him but he’s so conservative. I’m not sure how he’s going to go down with the Republicans up here.”

You have to understand: We don’t have any Mexicans up here, we’re not worried about that. Illegal immigrants are thin on the ground in New Hampshire, and if they’re here, they’re usually the help. We don’t want to lose them! And every third Unitarian minister is in a gay marriage. Those social issues just don’t play up here very well. Well, Cruz came up here, and he wowed everybody. I met him and talked to him for a while, and he kind of wowed me. I’ve been in this business too long to be charmed by politicians, but nonetheless he was charming. But on TV — no, you don’t get any of that.

**I don’t resonate to Trump’s TV personality, but obviously lots of people do. He’s playing a larger-than-life character that he has perfected over the years, and people love it.**

Right, and that’s what the polling is all about. We’re a long way from actually electing somebody president, or even nominating them for it. The polling secrets of Donald Trump are basically twofold. Who answers the phone at dinnertime? Who answers the phone at all? Who hasn’t got caller ID? If you see a *pollster*, do you answer your phone? Of course not. Nobody does.

The second thing is name recognition. You got somebody fuddled enough to answer their phone in the middle of dinner, and you ask them who they’re for. Name recognition pops out of their mouth, because I can’t remember all these jerks myself and I’m in the business. I would be like “There’s Jeb Bush, there’s the Rubio guy from Florida,” and then I’d be stuck. It’s like trying to name the Seven Dwarves after you’ve had a few drinks. And so, you know, what pops out of their mouth is Donald Trump.

**So your hunch is that it's all an illusion? He's not sticky and it's all gonna fall apart sooner or later?**

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's going to sink under the weight of its own absurdity, you know? Meanwhile, in my mind, it gives my political opponents a chance to say, "Oh my God – here is the true face of the GOP!"

**Trust me, we have been saying that. Day after day after day.**

And who can blame you? If I were on your side, I would too.

**I know we have to end this, and we haven't talked about the movie all that much. I understand you have a grievance with the title: "Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead."**

That title offends, I have to say. This comes from Bruce McCall, the fabulous guy who does all the New Yorker covers and is a very funny writer, besides being a fabulous illustrator. Bruce was pissed when Rick Meyerowitz's book came out and he said, "Yeah, they left out the part about all the hard work."

**Sure. Even if you guys were bombed half the time, or all the time, it's pretty clear you had to work like dogs to bring that thing to life.**

It was a lot of work. It was fun to do, but it was a lot of work. It was not, however, always all that much fun to be around. I did a piece in the Hollywood Reporter about "How I Killed the National Lampoon." Basically, having a bunch of comedians in one place is deadly. It's like having a sack full of cats.

**So you really don't blame [co-founder and editor] Henry Beard for taking that big buyout in 1975 and standing on a desk and telling the staff, "Fuck all of you. I'm never talking to any of you again?"**

Blame him? God, no. I wanted to join him.