

Jon Stewart, still a 'tiny, neurotic man,' back to remind Americans what's at stake

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It's an uncomfortable truth: Jon Stewart and Donald Trump both tapped the same well of latent public disaffection with politics and the media in the 2000s. Trust in [media](#) and [government](#) had been declining for several decades. But the symbiotic relationship between the White House and

the press during the Iraq War highlighted the dangers of a lap dog press.

It was against this backdrop that Stewart and Trump used their positions outside the fray to ally themselves with their audiences and draw pointed contrasts with the artifice of postmodern politics. But they did this—and continue to do this—in opposing ways.

Trump lashes out when politicians and journalists bring us closer to truth. Stewart criticizes them for keeping us in the dark. To Stewart, the solutions to America's political spectacle are political accountability and increased transparency. To Trump, the solution is far simpler: [He alone can fix it.](#)

In 2003, maybe Stewart could call himself "[a tiny, neurotic man, standing in the back of the room throwing tomatoes at the chalkboard.](#)" But today, with his [return on Monday nights](#) to host "The Daily Show," he is part of the school administration trying to keep the lights on and the students learning.

Criticizing Bush's war

During the George W. Bush years, Stewart perfected the art of ironic satire, playfully critiquing politicians, the press and the public, while implying something better was possible.

He feigned incredulity as he critiqued the Bush administration's [political hypocrisy](#) and cynical invocation of [Sept. 11](#) in its justification for the Iraq War.

Stewart used irony to describe failures of American policy as though they were fabulous successes. Like on July 16, 2007, when he said

enthusiastically, "As you know, we are now entering our fifth year of making ... very good progress in Iraq. Obviously the president defining 'progress' now as 'moving forward in time.'" Stewart invited his [young, politically interested, liberal/moderate audience](#) to conclude the opposite: "Things should not be this way, and we deserve better."

Around the same time, Trump was also criticizing Bush, but through [hyperbole and outrage rather than ironic satire](#). In 2007, he told [CNN's Wolf Blitzer that](#) "everything in Washington has been a lie. Weapons of mass destruction—it was a total lie. It was a way of attacking Iraq."

By 2011, Trump aimed his hyperbole and outrage at a new target: President Barack Obama. Trump challenged the legitimacy of Obama's presidency by [spreading racist lies about Obama's birthplace](#) and suggesting [that Obama was a Muslim](#). The "Birther Lie" launched Trump's political career. It also solidified his appeal among those whose worldview was amenable to authoritarian populism: those high in [political distrust, racial resentment](#) and [conspiricism](#).

Authoritarianism vs. democracy

[Trump has embraced an authoritarian vision of the presidency](#) with concentrated powers in the executive branch. If reelected, he has vowed to use the Department of Justice [to investigate political opponents](#) and has explored ways to use the [military to subdue political unrest](#) stemming from his reelection.

Trump's critiques of the press echo an authoritarian perspective, too. When Trump lambastes the press as "fake news," it is in response to negative coverage of himself [or fact checks of his own false statements](#).

To Stewart, though, journalism's failures are not ideological or personal, but professional. He criticizes them for not getting us closer to the truth.

He has critiqued [how journalists leave political spin uninterrogated](#), give time to "both sides" and "leave the conversation there," even when one side is demonstrably wrong. He has criticized politicians' reliance on [communications professionals](#) who [obfuscate the truth](#) to get more favorable coverage.

Stewart's new old role

Though a political outsider two decades ago, Stewart now finds himself inside the political and media institutions whose roles include making the public aware of—and thus safeguarding them from—the antidemocratic and destabilizing forces of [populist authoritarians like Trump](#).

Since Stewart's return to "The Daily Show" after his 2015 departure, he has interviewed democracy expert [Steven Levitsky](#) on ways to protect democracy, [journalist Jonathan Blitzer](#) about the complex forces shaping U.S. immigration policy, Middle East-focused journalists [Murtaza Hussain and Yair Rosenberg](#) on Israel's war in Gaza, and legal scholars [Melissa Murray and Kate Shaw](#) on Trump's efforts to avoid prosecution.

Through these conversations, Stewart showcases guests who espouse a pluralistic liberal vision of democracy. And through his satire, Stewart himself shows that democratic institutions and processes may be messy, but their ability to protect the will and liberty of the people makes them indispensable.

Or, as Stewart said in a February episode, "The difference between America's urinal-caked chaotic subways and Russia's candelabra'd beautiful subways is [the literal price of freedom](#)."

Stewart explained his 2024 return to "The Daily Show" as wanting to "have some kind of place to unload thoughts [as we get into this election season](#)."

But having studied the [content and effects of political satire](#) since Stewart became "The Daily Show" host in 1999, I see his return as evidence he recognizes the protective role he can play for American democracy. Because even if ironic satire isn't great at persuading people to change their minds, research shows it does subtly shape how we think about and engage with our political world.

When satirists cover an issue, viewers become more likely to [see that issue as important](#). Satire also shapes how people think about politicians and issues. In the early 2000s, I conducted a series of studies that revealed that exposure to jokes about [presidential candidates](#) provided study participants with criteria they then used to evaluate those candidates—like Al Gore's [lack of charisma](#) or George W. Bush's lack of intellect or performance on Iraq. And when study participants didn't have a lot of political knowledge, satire helped them fill in the gaps.

Satire is also great at highlighting [issues that audiences haven't thought much about](#), such as the implications of the Supreme Court's ruling in the [Citizens United](#) campaign finance decision.

Satire encourages audiences to pay [attention](#) and [discuss](#) politics in new ways, motivating them to seek out other information or talk about politics with friends. And even though satirists like Stewart may be critical of journalism, their programs highlight the importance of an independent press to a democratic society, increasing viewers' [perceptions of the importance of news](#).

There's always a role for the satirist

Because Trump's rhetoric is so explicit and outrageous, some have suggested it may [rob satirists of the ability to deconstruct his messaging](#). But despite its explicitness, there is still a lot that authoritarian populists like Trump don't ever say.

This is where satirists like Stewart can help fill in the gaps: By juxtaposing populist authoritarians' [glittering generalities](#) with the ugly reality of life under authoritarianism.

For example, in a recent episode of "The Daily Show," Stewart deconstructed Tucker Carlson's interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Carlson's glowing reviews of Russia's grocery stores and sparkling subway system.

"Perhaps if your handlers had allowed," Stewart says as though addressing Carlson, "you would have seen there is a hidden fee to your cheap groceries and orderly streets. Ask [likely assassinated opposition leader Alexei Navalny](#) or any of his supporters."

In a 2021 discussion [on CNN](#) about American democracy, Stewart lamented Democrats' endless hand-wringing over Trump's threat to democracy. Instead, Stewart proposed: "Action is the antithesis of anxiety."

What we see in Stewart's return is him reminding us that American democracy is never done. It takes constant action.

Stewart may still be "[a tiny, neurotic man](#)," but far from throwing tomatoes at the chalkboard, now he's standing tall in front of the class, and school is in session.

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