

Billionaires for Bush: Parody as Political Intervention

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Every joke is a tiny revolution.
- George Orwell

A certain degree of apprehension has always accompanied the integration of humor into the political discourse of Western culture. One might call this a reasonable anxiety, given that upsetting the accepted order of life has been the immortal mission of fools, clowns, jesters, and comedians across time and space. According to Wes Nisker in his poetic expositions of *Crazy Wisdom*, these characters "spread doubt about our beliefs, our abilities, our motives, our institutions, our sanity, our loves, our laws, our leaders, even our alliteration" (1990: 19). Historically, comedians have used humor as a process of revelation, not necessarily by pinpointing the truth, but rather by exposing the foibles and oversights of their time.

Of course, to focus solely on humor's capacity to highlight the social and political absurdities of a given moment is to overlook its most basic function: to entertain an audience. Patrons of comedy, whether gathered around a medieval court jester or waiting in a ticket line for a stand-up comedy routine, expect at the very least to have their worlds temporarily diverted from the troubles of everyday living. Whether through physical antics, wordplay, or storytelling, comedians use humor and wit much the same way other artists use their talents to engage an audience.

The association of humor with entertainment is precisely the reason political humor is seldom recognized as a valid form of political discourse. Humor is thought to trivialize the gravity of political issues, especially those dealing with war, poverty, or injustice. Humor is thought to attend to the irrational impulses of humanity, rather than

employ rationality and logic. Furthermore, a familiar tenet of political culture (though seemingly outdated for any modern democracy) is that while humor is for the masses, politics are for the exclusively competent. To bring popular appeal to the realm of politics is to degrade the quality of political debate.

In the past decade, however, the United States has witnessed a surge in the use of humor, and in particular parody, as political commentary, engagement, and resistance. A Pew Research Center study released in January of 2004 showed that 21% of people polled under the age of 30 "regularly get [presidential] campaign news" from comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* (Pew Research Center, 2004). The growing pervasiveness of the Internet as a legitimate vehicle for public discourse has also provided a popular and accessible means of integrating humor into the political process of this country, particularly through parody sites such as Whitehouse.org, the Borowitz Report, and the Onion¹. Furthermore, academic researchers, political scientists, and new media theorists alike have recently begun to recognize parody as a valid form of political discourse².

I intend this article to serve as an analysis of the role of humor and parody in spectacular postmodern culture, particularly as devices of political intervention. I am specifically interested in a) why parody is an appropriate device for political activism in postmodern culture, and b) how humor can politically engage the masses. This paper will also serve as a case study of Billionaires for Bush, a New York City-based political organization that uses humor and parody as tactics for political activation and education. I will examine how the Billionaires for Bush use parody to achieve their

ultimate goal of detracting from Bush's popularity and exposing the true nature of his "disastrous" economic policies. I choose not to approach this analysis with the intention of either supporting or opposing the use of parody in political discourse; rather I wish to determine roughly what objectives of a political resistance movement can be achieved by Billionaires for Bush-type activism, while also highlighting its possible limitations.

Government Of, By, and For the Corporations

To those who say Big Money should be kept out of politics, I say show me where in the Constitution it calls for a separation of cash and state!

-Phil T. Rich, CEO of Billionaires for Bush

On March 20th, 2004, the one-year anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, more than two million people worldwide took to the streets as part of a global protest organized by the United for Peace and Justice coalition. It was an opportunity for people in over 60 countries to mobilize in resistance to the occupation of Iraq and to the Bush administration's policy of preemptive war. Having spent the majority of my four years as an activist and organizer in Atlanta, Georgia, I found myself gearing up that morning for what was to be my first time participating in a protest of such a grand scale in New York City. But it was more than regional differences that I was anticipating on that unseasonably temperate day. As I donned my sleeveless black evening gown, "diamond"-studded tiara, and feather boa, it occurred to me that this would be the first time since my indoctrination into progressive politics that I would be participating in a demonstration of political resistance as a *counter-protester*.

I was introduced to Billionaires for Bush and its lead organizer Andrew Boyd (a.k.a. Phil T. Rich) six months prior by my academic advisor at New York University who was aware of my interest in creative communication strategies of social justice movements. On its website, Billionaires for Bush describes itself as a "strategic media and street theater campaign whose combustible mix of humor, savvy messaging, grassroots participation, and cutting edge internet organizing tools will flush out the truth about the Bush administration's disastrous economic policies" (www.billionairesforbush.com). By impersonating billionaires through caricature, parody, and public spectacle, and by pledging an undying devotion to George W. Bush, Billionaires for Bush hopes to brand the President as nothing more than an ally and puppet to corporations and the super-wealthy. As a veteran of a number of social justice organizations that spend much more time on base-building and mobilizing than on devising mass media strategies, I was immediately intrigued by the existence of this activist collective—comprised mostly of white, middle-class, educated folks in their 20's and 30's—whose primary methodology for achieving their political objectives rested on the outreach capabilities of national and local media. Furthermore, I had never before witnessed such a blatant marriage of humor and politics outside of political cartoons and the occasional late-night television skit. In fact, most political discourse to which I had been exposed in both community organizing and academic work seemed to entail a most somber and prudent approach; humor seemed to be reserved for peripheral conversation and the occasional nihilistic comment. As with any political organization I had encountered over the years, my immediate questions centered on the efficacy and

value of the Billionaires for Bush line of attack. *Could parody-driven street theatre serve as an effective tool for political change? Would the absurdity inherent to the delivery of the Billionaires for Bush message detract from the legitimacy and authority of their politics?* After attending a few meetings—assemblages of a few of New York City's most infamous artist-activists, pranksters, and event planners—I was motivated to further my involvement by creating a Billionaire persona of my own. As with most neophyte Billionaires, this initiation involved three basic components: an attempt at a witty pseudonym (I took on the name Alotta Bling, "bling" serving as modern vernacular for "riches"), formal attire exhumed from the local thrift shop, and a short autobiography specifying the history of my hypothetical riches.

The concept for the Billionaires for Bush March 20th counter-protest in New York City was simple, but well organized. We would anchor ourselves to the traffic island situated near the corner of Broadway and 34th Street in midtown Manhattan, where we would have prime access to the UFPJ antiwar march route and media opportunities. The dress code, along with other vital information concerning the counter-protest, was addressed in a previous email sent to the organization's listserv: ball gowns, tiaras, fake furs, et cetera for the ladies; sport tuxedos, bowler hats, monocles, et cetera for the men. Participants were discouraged from bringing any of the homemade marker-and-posterboard signs that were typical of grassroots protests. Instead, the organization provided professionally designed placards, colorfully printed with slogans such as "Four More Wars" and "Leave No Billionaire Behind." It seemed

that if there was one thing that the lead organizers of the Billionaires for Bush knew, it was how to art direct.

I arrived solo to the corner of 34th and Broadway feeling slightly self-conscious of my ostentatious attire, trying hard to blend in with the tourists and shoppers darting in and out of the Macy's department store across the street. Fortunately, my fellow counter-protesters, even those Billionaires I had never met before, were easy to spot. As we began gathering, the majority of us apparently feeling both awkward and emboldened by the exaggerated extravagance of our fashion, conversation topics wavered between street position strategies and media talking points. Occasionally, our dialogues would be adorned with naïve attempts at the quintessentially pretentious British accent, the theatrically trained constituents of our group naturally more successful than the rest. When our group attained a critical mass of about twenty people, bemused passersby began slowing down to form our initial audience of spectators. Our presence quickly began attracting the attention of media, both professional and amateur, even before the UFPJ march reached our position on the route. Tourists and press photographers alike competed for the perfect shot of our midday costume party.

After a few group photographs, we assembled along the western sidewalk of 34th Street behind a 12-foot velvet rope barrier fashioned the night before by Billionaire Meg A. Bucks. Policemen assigned post to this particular leg of the march were initially baffled by our intentions as they waited for the approach of the UFPJ protest march, but most caught on quickly to the "joke," doing their best to allow only

brief lapses in their stern demeanor. Chanting among our group erupted spontaneously, mimicking the content and call-and-response style of typical protest incantations.

BIG MONEY... UNITED... SHALL NEVER BE DEFEATED!

FOUR MORE WARS! FOUR MORE WARS!

*SHOW ME WHAT PLUTOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!
THIS IS WHAT PLUTOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!*

Spectators anticipating the thousands of antiwar demonstrators scheduled to take over midtown Manhattan that Saturday began performing the classic double take. Gaping mouths and furrowed brows clearly revealed the audience's initial thoughts. *Are the people dressed up in fancy gowns and tuxedos demonstrating for or against the war? Are they serious, or just having a good time? And, of course, the most basic and yet most complicated question of them all: Is this real, or is this fake?*

Tension mounted as the first trickle of media and police heading the march came into view. By this time, our chanting had assumed a more comfortable rhythm, though we racked our brains for fresh verses. The seemingly endless wave of protesters carrying signs that read "Bush Lies, Who Dies?" and "End the Occupation" was intimidating, but served to reinvigorate our theatrical gestures. The initial clash of protester, counter-protester, and media created an enormous swell of movement, shouting, and laughter around the 34th Street traffic island. A number of antiwar protesters on the opposite side of the street stopped midway through their chanting to find out what the uproar was all about and determine whether we were, in fact, allies or foes. Many protesters took a break from marching to witness the diversion, some

responding by simply laughing and cheering while the more enterprising marchers assumed a spontaneous role in the skit by exchanging put-downs with the Billionaires.

All the while, the chanting persisted.

*1-2-3-4, WE'VE GOT BILLIONS, BUT WE WANT MORE!
5-6-7-8, CUT MORE TAXES, WE CAN'T WAIT!*

*WHAT DO WE WANT? SWEATSHOP LABOR!
WHEN DO WE WANT IT? NOW!*

A few Billionaires took advantage of the brief lulls between chants to test out their individual routines. Monty Moneybucks, dressed handsomely in full tuxedo regalia and top hat, would occasionally step out from behind the velvet rope into the crowd of protesters shouting, "Never before have I witnessed so many work so hard for the benefit of so few! It is the best of times! And all of you commoners are ruining it! Ruining it for the rest of us! President Bush is the best president money can buy!" Meg A. Bucks found her specialty in interacting with younger marchers, approaching nine- and ten-year-old protesters with offers to work in her factory that specialized in child labor profiting. The occasional heckler in the audience would be reproached by a Billionaire pointing a finger and screaming, "Outsource that man's (or woman's) job!" or "Stop complaining and buy your own President!" Each wave of the march brought a new energy to our chanting and actions, leaving us less discouraged at having to repeat the same shtick every ten minutes. Perhaps the climax of the spectacle occurred in a call-and-response chant that spontaneously erupted between one impassioned UFPJ marcher and a number of Billionaires.

Marcher (dishearteningly): WHOSE GOVERNMENT?!
Billionaires (gleefully): OUR GOVERNMENT!

Marcher: WHOSE MEDIA?!

Billionaires: OUR MEDIA!

Marcher: WHOSE OIL?!

Billionaires: OUR OIL!

Members of the press repeatedly pulled some of the more vocal Billionaires aside for interviews. Interviewees, often to the disdain of the interviewers who were anxious for the "joke" to end and the "real" exchange to begin, attempted to stay in character while responding to the questions probing their attendance as counter-protesters. Usually, however, the Billionaire would step out of character for a few moments and explain the organization's objectives, passing out a flag-and-dollar-bill-themed business card with the Billionaires for Bush website address and contact information.

The exhilaration lasted in waves for the entire three-hour length of the march. By the end, most of us were drained and hoarse, feet aching from standing for hours in our high heels and wingtips. We were immediately certain that the day had been a successful one; all of our fliers had been handed out, many had inquired about how to join our organization, and, most importantly, over a dozen contacts and interviews had been made with major and local media outlets. Our next major street theatre action was not for another month: Tax Day on April 15th. The Billionaires for Bush had decided it would be a good idea to greet last-minute tax payers lined up at the post office on the evening of the 15th, and thank the little people for paying "our" share of the burden.

The Problematic Search for Political Truth in Postmodern Society

We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.

- Jean Baudrillard
Simulacra and Simulation

Political activism has perhaps found its greatest antagonist in the culture of postmodernity in postindustrial Western society. The relativity of "truth" becomes all too apparent in a country overly mediated and inundated by images and information extending from endless perspectives. As mass communication and the mass media propagate a world of signs, symbols, and icons, we are left to supplant our sense of reality and history with an amalgamated collection of images and sound bites that present only a manufactured semblance of truth.

One basic principle of postmodernism, then, lies in its acknowledgement of these conditions and its fundamental questioning and skepticism towards all ideological positions and claims to truth. Political activism, when steeped in ideology, consequently encounters its defeat in postmodern culture. Indeed, postmodernity lends itself to a more negativist, deconstructing approach to society and politics than to a utopia-inspired, action-oriented engagement. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon asserts that while postmodernity offers "no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique" (original italics, 2002: 3). The ultimate task of postmodernism, then, is to point out that reality and truth, especially when imposed by authority, are but social constructions determined

by our ideologically steeped perspectives; that which is 'natural' is in fact a product of the political and social apparatuses that guide our interpretations of information.

In order to initiate these ideological deconstructions and highlight the connection between "truth" and its context, certain postmodern devices embody the traits of self-consciousness and self-contradiction within the double process of reinforcement and subversion of the past. *Parody* is but one postmodern device that exemplifies the capabilities of self-reflexivity and ironic juxtaposition. Parody, the self-referential art form that involves the imitation of a style in such an exaggerated way as to make its features more visible, has existed since the premodern era, but has a particular function appropriate to postmodern times. According to Hutcheon, parody "signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (2002: 89). That is, parody involves a foreground *and* background narrative—a surface message embedded in, but set in ironic contrast to, its context. Ironic exaggeration makes obvious the need to acknowledge and interpret the multiple relationships between the two narratives. This exaggeration, whether subtle or obvious, is necessary to prompt the decoding of parody's fundamental intertextuality; otherwise, parody simply becomes plagiarism or a reinforcement of the surface narrative.

The parody of *Billionaires for Bush* undoubtedly involves the interference and reflexivity of double narratives—for example, the narrative of the protester versus the narrative of the Billionaire. The over-the-top caricaturing of the billionaire persona creates a cognitive dissonance in the mind of the spectator that results in the creation

of a number of distancing questions that allow the spectator to immediately begin decoding the performance and to make sense of the social commentary behind it. The spectator is immediately aware that billionaires typically do not participate in street protests. The spectator is also immediately aware that billionaires do not actually wear tiaras or bowler hats on a regular basis. This awareness completes the parody, leaving the spectator critically searching for the point in the scenario where reality ends and exaggeration begins.

One criticism of political parody—whether in the form of websites or street theatre—is that parody ends at commentary and offers no dialectical antithesis to that which is being criticized in order to generate a resolution. However, as previously stated, postmodernism by nature precludes any claim to ultimate truth, thereby limiting the postmodern activist's ability to offer ideological alternatives. Perhaps negativism and deconstruction are the only possible approaches to politics in a culture in which there exists an "unwillingness to make decisions about meaning that would imply singularity or fixity" (Hutcheon 1992: 37). Parody, then, becomes a powerful political tool in prompting resistance to dominant ideologies without necessarily imposing an equally questionable set of dogma. Overall, parody encourages skepticism and the deconstruction of "common sense" as promoted by those in power. While parody bars the creation of disciples united under a single doctrine, it does endorse the creation of critical thinkers whose political power lies in their ability to challenge the authoritarian imposition of "truth."

Entertainment as Engagement in the Age of the Spectacle

He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to be regarded as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax.

- Guy Debord
Comments on the Society of the Spectacle

Political discourse in postindustrial Western society has inevitably been shaped by the omnipresence of free market ideology. The creation of a consumer society, fueled by capitalism, both reflects and demands the rampant commodification and commercialization of products and services, with advertising and marketing generating pseudo-needs to maintain the cycle of production/consumption and supply/demand. The movement of political debate in the United States consumer market, therefore, greatly relies on its "salability." Simply put, if it cannot please the masses or the target market, and cannot turn a profit, it will not survive in the commercial market. The ability to captivate and the ability to entertain, therefore, become vital characteristics of any form of communication entering a public discourse shaped by commercialism and profit.

The social conditions produced by more advanced stages of capitalism take form in what Guy Debord called "the society of the spectacle." According to Debord:

The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity (1994: 42).

The commodifying nature of the spectacle is best represented in the United States by the culture produced by the mass media. As long as the political economy is

dominated by the motivations of capitalism, the spectacle is inescapable. The prominence of commercial television as this society's primary medium for political discourse attests to this inescapability. For example, in addition to citing the popularity of comedy shows as a political resource for younger generations, the Pew Research Poll report from January 2004 also confirmed that "television as a whole remains the public's main source of campaign news" (Pew Research Center, 2004). According to Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the implications of this phenomenon deal directly with the quality of information that is accessible by television viewers. Postman argues that:

Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure (1985:82).

All information that passes through commercial television—whether dealing with politics, sports, or Hollywood—must be packaged with a certain level of mass-appealing luster. In the society of the spectacle, any news item that might be perceived as overly complex or uninteresting must be reproduced and consumed as an entertainment product. That is, for news and information to be profitable, it must be both accessible and able to engage the attention of the masses.

As such, entertainment becomes the primary vehicle for the distribution and exchange of information within the society of the spectacle. Under this condition, the fostering of political dialogue no longer necessitates a somber, humorless approach. In fact, the treatment of politics as strictly serious subject matter could potentially disengage and deactivate a good portion of the public that has become accustomed

to the media culture of infotainment. Indeed, humor is effective in disarming the notion that politics are often intimidating, convoluted, and indigestible.

While theorists like Neil Postman criticize the nature of public discourse in "the age of show business," political realists recognize that to attempt to escape the postmodern spectacle is to be overly idealistic and ultimately ineffectual. Postmodern culture reflects the integration of mass, popular culture into all social realms previously dominated by exclusivity and high culture, including art, education, and politics. That the process of humor involves both intellect and accessibility reflects this condition, making it a most appropriate tool for postmodernists and political realists alike.

Evaluating the success of Billionaires for Bush working within and with the tools of spectacular society can simply be a matter of recognizing their popularity with and ability to use the mass media. Within the eleven months of their existence, the Billionaires have generated countless appearances in mass media, mostly in national press (<http://www.billionairesforbush.com/press.php>). In fact, the Billionaires achieved an unprecedented record with the *New York Times*, appearing as the main subject in four articles within two months. This amount of attention from one of the most distinguished commercial news outlets of the country is exceptional for any organization or event, much less one that pushes a progressive political agenda.

The Billionaires have certainly mastered the art of attracting the devices of spectacular society, but how successful have they been in using the spectacle to the benefit of their ultimate goal: detracting from the popularity of George Bush? Of course, such achievements are hard to quantify, but an examination of the content of

these media appearances can serve as an adequate indication. The focus of the articles attests to the fact that while the use of humor and entertainment can easily attract the attention of the masses and the press, it is a more difficult task to use this method to propagate a complex political message. This is, of course, the expected challenge in using entertainment to push a serious political message. Most articles highlighted the novelty of the Billionaire approach to political activism, but did not give center stage to their actual political angle. While most articles gave reference to the Billionaires for Bush website, which provides a more in-depth commentary and analysis of Bush's economic policies, the articles themselves give only sound bites of information. In the end, the Billionaires have certainly succeeded in becoming cultural icons. As to whether this status is enough to penetrate the voting predisposition of swing states before the November election, one can only speculate the impact of popular culture on the political inclinations of this country's citizens.

Conclusion

Parody and humor are effective methods for initiating political engagement and resistance in a number of ways. First, it is appropriate to the culture of postindustrial Western society, in which postmodernism designates humor and entertainment to be as valid a method of political engagement as any somber approach. Second, the use of irony and parody promotes negation, critical thinking, and skepticism, all of which are important tools for invalidating the ideological

dominance of those in power. The use of caricature and over-exaggerated irony in this type of performance also functions to jolt the spectator out of his/her normalized, familiar way of seeing things, and distances him/her to the extent that he/she becomes conscious of the political commentary that is in effect.

The only ostensible weakness of this approach seems to be in educating the audience on the complex arguments and context associated with any political viewpoint (such as the history behind Bush's economic policies). With multiple devices running simultaneously (such as humor, parody, irony, caricature, etc.), it seems almost impossible to squeeze in any amount of profound theory or information. Perhaps this is appropriate, since humor, parody, and entertainment are intended to appeal more to the emotions than to the rationality of the spectator. With *Billionaires for Bush*, however, the strategy of using the emotional appeal as an entry point to then engage a more serious discussion is somewhat problematic; the attention span of the press and the public living in these stimulus-inundated times seems too fleeting to offer this opportunity.

Perhaps the most effective strategy of the *Billionaires for Bush* lies in their method of humor, which integrates wit and accessibility, evoking mass appeal, engagement, and amusement. The popularity of the *Billionaires for Bush* speaks for the public atmosphere that is created in their events and actions—one in which it is okay to laugh and enjoy oneself while discussing politics. It is effective because it is a disarming form of politics that maintains the ability to unite people from various

ideological backgrounds under the common desire to counteract the political authority of those in power.

Epilogue: Where the Campaign is Now

As August 2004 comes to an end, the Billionaires for Bush find themselves at the beginning of the most intense portion of their campaign. With a little more than two months until the election, the Billionaires have prioritized building media and chapter presence in the crucial election battleground states³. As such, the Billionaires have hit the campaign trail by launching a "Get on the Limo" swing state tour, a four-week tour of these swing states where they will stage rallies, recruit new Billionaires, and strengthen budding chapters (<http://www.billionairesforbush.com/limotour.php>). As of August, the Billionaires have over 70 registered chapters around the nation, not to mention a number of loosely organized wildcat chapters that use the online Do-It-Yourself Manual to coordinate spontaneous actions. The Billionaires also plan to have a significant presence at the Republican National Convention in New York City at the end of August, with events including a "Million Billionaire March" and "Coronation Ball" (<http://www.billionairesforbush.com/rnc>). The Billionaires will also organize a number of National Days of Action over the next two months, including "Cheap Labor Day" on September 6th and "Education Is a Privilege Day" on September 19th. After the election is over, the Billionaires plan to tweak their message according to who gets elected, but will continue to work to expose the enormous influence that corporations and wealthy individuals have on our government's policy-making.

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¹ <http://www.whitehouse.org>, <http://www.borowitzreport.com>, <http://www.theonion.com>

² Barbara Warnick, for example, a professor of Communications at the University of Washington, analyzed Bush/Gore parody sites during the 2000 presidential campaign, and noted that successful political parody sites "carved out a textual space through interlaced patterns of reference and allusion, and they designed messages that developed progressively and produced a convergence of thought and ideology" (Warnick 2000).

³ Including, but not limited to, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Louisiana.