Laughing in the Face of Tragedy: 
Topical Humor in the United States One Year After 9/11

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ABSTRACT

Laughing in the Face of Tragedy:
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This dissertation examines topical humor produced by “Late Night with David Letterman,” “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” “Saturday Night Live,” and The Onion for the period of one-year after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Three phases emerge: the purgation of extreme emotions like anger, acceptance or tolerance of the attacks, and adaptation to a changed world that includes the possibility of future attacks. A rhetorical study of topical humor exposes these changes in the nation over the course of a year. Additionally, topical humor became more skeptical of individual and institutional reactions to 9/11 over this time period, which both reflects and influences these shifting attitudes in the nation. Topical humor is a form of epideictic rhetoric that relies upon the shared values of the audience in order to create humor, allowing for the mutual creation of meaning among producers and receivers of this discourse. Topical humor speaks in a double voice because it must be entertaining and informative. Such duality enables topical humor to address both comedy and tragedy, rely upon emotion and intellect, invoke reason and imagination, and provide enjoyment and provoke critical thought. This discourse has existed in the nation since its founding and thus provides a wealth of texts that illuminate the negotiation of values in the nation with respect to a myriad of events and people. Its continued popularity, accessibility and diversity makes topical humor a unifying and democratic discourse. Such discursive longevity and continued popularity hold great potential for future rhetorical studies that seek to explore both historical and contemporary issues in the public sphere.
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## BIBLIOGRAPHY
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:
LAUGHING IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY

At 8:46 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a commercial airplane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Another plane, also commercial, crashed into the South Tower about fifteen minutes later, an occurrence that was broadcast live from the television cameras focused on the North Tower. While journalists and citizens alike tried to process what happened to the World Trade Center in New York, another airplane flew into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. at 9:37 a.m. E.D.T. A fourth airplane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, 150 miles northwest of Washington, D.C., shortly after 10:00 a.m. E.D.T. By 10:30 a.m., the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center had collapsed. This scene was captured on live television in images that shared time with a split screen that depicted a smoldering and partially collapsed Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Within one hour and twenty minutes, all normalcy and safety in the United States seemed to have evaporated. There was wild speculation over why airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as who turned domestic airplanes into weapons. However, one fact seemed clear: the United States was under attack. Citizens experienced a communal sense of shock and horror. Peter Jennings and other journalists used Pearl Harbor as the closest analogy to help contextualize the new terrorist attacks for a country not familiar with military strikes within its borders. The island of Manhattan, government offices, financial buildings, and large office towers across the United States were evacuated. People with friends and family in Washington, D.C. and New York attempted to get in touch with their loved ones to find out if
they were among the living or the dead. Citizens became transfixed by television news broadcasts, hoping to obtain some information to make sense of these acts of terrorism.

Given the gravity of the situation, it may seem odd that a rhetorical study would undertake an examination of topical humor\(^1\) produced on late night television and in *The Onion* for a period of one year after the attacks. September 11 has frequently been cast as a unique and extraordinary occurrence. In his September 20, 2001 address to Congress and the nation, President Bush noted that Pearl Harbor and 9/11 stood out as the most tragic attacks in a 136-year history of war because they took place within the nation’s borders (Bush 2001). However, the United States has a tradition of using humor as a response to and a means of overcoming tragic events. Indeed, this nation has suffered many tragedies, each of which has a corresponding body of humorous discourse.

For example, American humor was used to help re-establish unity after the Civil War fractured national identity (Rourke 1931, 220). Humor was also produced during World War II in the form of editorial cartoons, jokes and satires, a large collection of which can be found in Charles Osgood’s *Kilroy Was Here: The Best American Humor from World War II*. More recently, the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 inspired a series of “sick jokes,” such as, “what were JFK’s last words upon leaving Washington, D.C.? ‘I need a trip to Dallas like I need a hole in the head’” (Dundes 1987, 73). Engaging in the production and reception of humor, especially in times of extreme tragedy, is a national tradition that helps people to transcend tragic circumstances and adapt to the contingencies of a modern world. The discourse of humor helps a nation to move beyond tragedies and reestablish community, a practice it has undertaken since

\(^1\) By topical humor, I mean comedy that relies upon current events as a main source of invention. Specific examples can range from single jokes to longer works of satire, but contemporary topics of social significance are a defining characteristic of topical humor.
the Puritans came to the New World and one that continued in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11.

In this study, I examine the monologues from “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” “Late Night with David Letterman,” parodies from “Saturday Night Live,” and the satire\(^2\) contained in *The Onion* for the period of one year after September 11, 2001. There are three core chapters, each representing about four months of time. These divisions are not wholly arbitrary, as the immediate shock of the attacks created a different rhetorical situation from that found four or eight months after the attacks. Topical humor initially allowed citizens to work through negative emotions such as anger and sadness, and then facilitated an uneasy acceptance of the tragedies. Only after extreme emotions were released and the tragic situation was accepted as a reality could the public adapt to a new world in which terrorist attacks are a possibility.

In this introductory chapter, I explain my selection of texts and why they are best suited to locate and track shifting attitudes in the United States after 9/11. Then, I discuss the tradition of humor in the United States and how it functions to both critique and establish the national character and common values, a tradition that continues to this day in topical humor. In addition to being a part of the American tradition, humor is also an element in the classical rhetorical handbooks, and I outline how Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and the auctor of the *Ad Herennium* theorized about humor as a rhetorical construct. I also outline my theoretical foundations for these analyses, which rest on humor theory, literary theory and the rhetorical function of epideictic discourse. I will then summarize my theoretical apparatus to illustrate how I will unite these various theories as a means to analyze topical humor. My analyses will show how these discourses helped citizens to purge emotions, accept and adapt to 9/11.

\(^2\) Satire refers to “the use of ridicule, irony, sarcasm, etc., to expose folly or vice or to lampoon an individual” (*Oxford American Dictionary*, 1999).
Selection of Texts

The central texts under examination in this dissertation are “Late Night with David Letterman,” “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” “Saturday Night Live” and *The Onion*. These discourses are consistent with the American tradition of comedy due to their focus on topical humor, combination of wit and brevity, and ability to incorporate tragic events into a humorous dialogue, characteristics that I will discuss in more detail shortly. However, I wish to justify further my choice of these texts as representative of humor produced one year after September 11.

One unifying feature of topical humor is a shared content matter relating to current events. The focus on topical matters as a source of invention for humorous commentary makes this brand of humor both salient and socially relevant. While one-liner jokes are contained within most late night monologues, other texts that I have selected include satirical skits, parodies of political leaders, and the ridicule of traditional forms of journalism such as the newspaper and television newscasts. All of the texts in this study employ topical humor, but this is not a study of humor in general. The only type of discourse under examination herein is topical humor relating to current events and produced by longstanding and popular contemporary humorists, a discourse that informs audiences about current happenings while simultaneously reflecting and critiquing contemporary societal values.

The reputation of any rhetor is a vital component in the production of persuasive texts, and all of the producers of humor discussed herein have an established ethos with their respective audiences. Each topical humorist had a previously developed reputation with audiences long before the attacks of September 11. David Letterman had been on the air for a total of 19 years on both NBC and CBS; Jay Leno took over hosting “The Tonight Show” from
Johnny Carson nine years prior; “Saturday Night Live” had been on television for 26 years; and The Onion had been in a print edition for 13 years and available on-line for five. All humorists continue in their roles as comic guardians over five years after the attacks.

The topical humorists discussed herein were familiar to U.S. audiences who turned to them over the decades for a humorous take on the nightly news and important world events. These discourses disseminate items in the news as well as entertain audiences. The combination of the two allows audiences to better remember historical alongside current occurrences, which makes topical humor a particularly persuasive form of communication. The personalities and reputations attached to each of these discourses are important in determining audience expectations. This makes the contemporary practice of topical humor in response to a national tragedy an especially compelling object for rhetorical study.

A potential drawback to my selected texts is that they fail to reflect the United States’ diverse population. Jay Leno and David Letterman are white men, as are the majority of comedic actors on “Saturday Night Live.” The writing staff of The Onion are likely more heterogeneous, but they do not appear before an audience like the hosts of television shows and thus are not publicly visible. Further, the bylines featured in The Onion are fake names given for comedic purposes, not the names of the real contributors to the paper. Given this lack of racial and gender diversity, I could be accused of overlooking whether and how non-whites and non-males produced humor relating to September 11. Additionally, all of these examples are representative of mainstream humor in the United States. More radical and conservative humorous discourses were produced in the year after September 11, but focusing upon centrist topical humor will illuminate the attitudes and values of average Americans during the time period at issue.
Questions of diversity among the producers of topical humor intrigue me, but there are no television personalities or shows with minority hosts (who may or may not possess more subversive attitudes in relation to current events) with the same established ethos, public sphere longevity, or that are distributed for free, like the texts contained herein. Focusing on mainstream topical humor precludes me from examining diversity in this study, but it does allow for an investigation into how such mainstream outlets addressed the tragedy of 9/11.

Another important fact to note about my texts is their ultimate goal: to make money. While Letterman, Leno and “Saturday Night Live” have more star power and larger budgets than The Onion, each of these examples of topical humor is market-driven. Instead of denigrating the significance of their discourse, this comment highlights that these producers must please both an audience and the advertisers. Some may argue that serving two masters blunts the critical edge of topical humor, but my research does not support this allegation. These topical humorists may face greater rhetorical difficulties producing critical discourse, but they do consistently direct criticisms at those in positions of power. The longstanding tradition and popularity of topical humor in the United States helps explains this successful negotiation of pleasing audiences and advertisers. Topical humor is not unique in this respect because rhetoric frequently addresses multiple audiences, a practice that produces examples of complex discourse and providing opportunities for rich rhetorical analysis.

The American Tradition of Humor

One of the earliest examples of satire produced in New England was written in 1637. The work, The New England Canaan, mocked Puritan society by exaggerating its characteristics in order to create a stereotype (Walker 1998, 18). While this text was likely divisive by setting apart a particular group of people, the majority of humor produced in the nascent nation served
to form a community by incorporating common values (Walker, Yates, Rourke). For example, the use of the term “Yankee,” originally a derogatory term used by the British to refer to inhabitants of New England, morphed into a humorous figure that “always made shrewd or caustic comments” (Rourke 1931, 29). The Yankee began to appear on stage and in works of literature, becoming a voice of reason in the new country used to provoke laughter through the use of sarcastic remarks. By “creating laughter, [the Yankee] also created a fresh sense of unity. . . . It was to survive many fanciful manifestations as an outline of the American character; it has never been lost” (Rourke 1931, 31).

Most scholars point to Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanac as an exemplar of Yankee discourse that helped to create the tradition of humor in the United States. Franklin’s pithy and witty sayings are quoted to this day and represent two qualities vital to the survival of pioneers carving out a new country on foreign soil: common sense and a sense of humor. American folklore and humor scholar Walter Blair goes so far as to contend that the combination of brevity and wit found in “Poor Richard” represents the twin pillars of persuasive communication in the United States: “For almost two centuries the best way to make an idea tasty to most of the people in this country has been to serve it up with a sauce of native-grown humor and horse sense. Because they have loved to laugh and because they have thought horse sense was the best kind of truth” (Blair 1993, 5). Expressing common sense humorously, and doing so quickly, is difficult and hints at the complexity of topical humor.

The fusion of “horse sense” and humor is not exclusive to the eastern seaboard, the geographical area that often comes to mind when one thinks of a Yankee. In his study tracing the roots of humor in the United States, Norris Yates contends that the “Yankee” became a fusion of several distinct national identities, including the “rural crackerbox tradition and the humor of
urbanity and urban living” (Yates 1964, 62). The term Yankee eventually faded from everyday parlance, but the tradition of espousing common sense in a humorous way continues to this day. More importantly, by fusing eastern, southern and pioneer knowledge, and combining words from different dialects, the Yankee figure evolved to incorporate and embody national characteristics that a fledgling country required to form a common identity, a unity needed to instill a sense of community and instill shared values.

The Yankee represents one strain of humor in the United States, but as immigrants continued to enter the United States, other voices emerged to articulate the shared values of this country. Additionally, the migration of citizens from the country to urban areas for work in the late 19th century also required that humor reflect the increasing diversity of the nation. Finley Peter Dunne created Mr. Dooley, a composite of Irish immigrants in Chicago to act as both an “oracle and citizen” in his short and pointed attacks on “the ignorance and fickleness of the public as a whole, regardless of social classes” (Yates 1964, 83-85). In addition to brevity and common sense noted in the Yankee strain of humor, a healthy skepticism towards politics and current events emerged as a common trait of popular humorists, for example Will Rogers (Yates 1964, 87).

Skepticism became a defining characteristic of American humor between 1910 and 1920 (Yates 1964, 140). Topical humorists used skepticism as a tool with which to locate the middle ground of controversies by caricaturing participants and mocking extreme positions (Yates 1964, 116; Blair 1993, 122), a practice Rogers used to skewer groups both for and against prohibition. While skepticism can be a tool to highlight the irrationality of certain current events, this practice brings up an inherent tension between topical humorists’ calls for change from the status quo and their reliance on society’s “fixed standards” as reference points for humor (Yates 1964, 138).
The tension evident in the discourse of topical humor, that of simultaneously mocking social values and goading Americans to live up to them, is a strain that resides in the nation itself. The disparity between the ideal of the American dream and the practice of an American reality can be tragic and difficult to reconcile, but humor has often relied upon this paradox as a source of invention (Walker 1998, 63; Boskin 1997). Indeed, humor has been used regularly as a coping mechanism for both the everyday indignities of the human condition and more tragic occurrences. The tradition of American humor, perhaps all humor, is one that speaks in two voices. For example, topical humor is radical and conservative, informative and entertaining, tragic and comic, skeptical and accepting, unifying and divisive, and these paradoxes can often be found within a single example of humor. The inherent polysemy of topical humor helps explain the popularity and appeal of this discourse throughout the history of the United States.

Such tension between the ideal and reality, coupled with a dose of skepticism, is evident in brief examples from some well-respected American humorists. Mark Twain commented: “Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please.” Will Rogers stated: “Ancient Rome declined because it had a Senate; now what’s going to happen to us with both a Senate and a House?” H. L. Mencken noted: “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.” Bob Hope observed: “A bank is a place that will lend you money if you can prove that you don’t need it.” And Lenny Bruce, a stand-up comedian who attracted considerable controversy but has since been championed as an advocate of free speech, stated: “Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God.”

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3 The following quotations can be found at http://www.quotationspage.com.
These witty comments are certainly not exhaustive of the longstanding and prolific American tradition of topical humor, but they do illustrate the double-voiced nature of this discourse, as well as an increasing amount of skepticism directed at current events. While the Yankee was known for “shrewd or caustic comments” (Rourke 1931, 29), the skepticism of both producers and receivers of topical humor became more pointed over time. Such increased skepticism first appeared at the end of the 1800s, but a more prevalent attitude of doubt and incredulity became even more pronounced after the Second World War. Walter Blair explains the difference in post-World War II humor as follows: “the older humor was affirmative; the modern humor is negative. . . . The only possible course for modern humorists, therefore, is to shape their comedy so as to exploit incongruities inherent in this one widely shared attitude [doubt]” (Blair 1993, 121-122). Such widespread doubt bordering on cynicism about the propriety of current events continues to be a shared common value in the United States.

There are thus three strains of topical humor in the nation: the good-natured but pointed comments of the Yankee; a skeptical view toward politics and social concerns; and, a borderline cynicism that emerged after the use of nuclear weapons. The increased level of skepticism in the nation can be identified in the topical humor produced after World War II, a humor infused with a cynical outlook. Lenny Bruce’s comment above is indicative of this cynical strain, as is the work of Richard Pryor, Lewis Black and Chris Rock. Maintaining a sense of continuity among these three strains is important for mainstream topical humorists to sustain a sense of community in the nation: “Sharp breaks with the past are as rare in humorous writing as in other kinds, and whatever the nature of the re-evaluation, humorists may want to embody their values in new character types that will yet have recognizable continuity with those created earlier” (Yates 1964, 360). Thus, good-natured criticism, skepticism and cynicism are not incompatible with each
other and often overlap or are used simultaneously, as the examples taken from Letterman, Leno, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion will demonstrate.

The three strains of topical humor are not the only means to trace continuity in the nation’s humorous discourse. The topics addressed by topical humor may also recur over time. The quotations introduced above represent examples of topical humor that span almost a century, necessitating a focus on a variety of social issues. However, Twain, Mencken and Bruce all addressed issues of race and racism. Simply focusing on the same topics does not make all topical humor equal, though. Indeed, the broader social climate at any given time is as important to topical humor as the humorous commentary itself. Time has shown that humorists who best gauge the contemporary milieu in their creation of discourse are well respected and popular in times both of boredom and of catastrophe.

Humor’s modes of transmission have also changed across time, from speaking engagements, to novels, plays, newspapers, radio broadcasts, television, and most recently the Internet. However, even with the invention of new outlets for topical humor, the earliest forms are still used. For example, stand-up comedy continues as a popular form of topical humor, as do editorial cartoons and columns. Thus, while modes of transmission have expanded over the years, the continued practice of earlier forms despite the emergence of newer ones as well, speaks to the popularity of and demand for topical humor in the nation. Certainly modes of transmission impact audience reception and elements of production; however, topical humor is a durable form of public discourse that has been in continuous circulation in some form or another from this nation’s inception.

The tradition of humor that began with the Yankee as a national spokesperson capable of projecting and creating a unified identity and incorporated an increased skepticism over time
continues to this day through topical humorists, like David Letterman, Jay Leno and Jon Stewart. Modern nations still require a means to maintain cohesiveness, and one means to do so is through an articulation of common national characteristics, which can be efficiently expressed in humorous comments. Topical comedians establish this unity through a fusion of current events, popular culture and national values as the subject matter of their observations. Commenting on newsworthy people and events (or celebrities) helps audiences become a community because these common issues unite various and diverse populations. While attitudes towards any given occurrence will certainly vary, using current events as a way to establish what is important and should be discussed fosters unity about topics, if not agreement on opinions.

Topical humorists serve an agenda setting function by selecting issues in the news that should be talked about or held up for public scrutiny and/or ridicule, and in many cases, the topics are political in nature. This continues a tradition established by early American humorists, in that the majority of humor produced between 1830 and 1900 was dominated by political themes (Blair 1993, 26). The comic strip, an American invention dating back to 1895 (Walker 1998, 4), is a genre that continues to employ political themes, but is actually not as old a form as the monologue, the essential basis for American humor (Rourke 1931, 20-21; Yates 1964, 354).

In addition to the tradition of uniting disparate audiences to form a common national identity, Letterman and Leno also use the monologue to assert and critique the republic’s values. The string of observations known as the monologue comes at the beginning of most late night talk shows and addresses a gamut of current events covered in the daily news. Even before its use by Revolutionary-era Yankees, the monologue had its precursor in ancient civilizations: “The comic monologue seems as settled a convention as the Greek chorus; and it still embodies a familiar habit, that of the complete revelation which tells everything, tells little, and unfolds the
Asserting that humorists function as the country’s conscience may seem farfetched, but in her study of the national character through an examination of humor, Constance Rourke found that “[t]here is scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed” (Rourke 1931, ix). Both Yates and Rourke found that they could discern the nation’s values and how these values were first established through an examination of American humor. Humor continues to both reflect and influence what is important to the nation at any given time. National values and matters of importance are identifiable in topical humor because this discourse relies heavily upon context: “Humor, like all forms of communication, requires context: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values, which are subject to evolution from one century or even one decade to the next” (Walker 1998, 4). Indeed, this study contends that such context may change over the course of a few months.

The dual action of reflecting and influencing values, another way that topical humor exemplifies a type of double-voicedness, occurs by placing current events into a context of traditionally agreed-upon norms and contemporary attitudes (e.g. democracy is the best rule of law – but is it really working that well in a specific instance?). Because of this, topical humorists are able to gauge whether or not the nation is living up to its perceived legacy as well as to make judgments about that legacy within a situational context. In this manner, topical humorists both espouse the assumed national values, as well as call them into question through the use of ridicule or public mockery (Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is frequently read as an
anti-slavery tome that uses humor to break down racism in a country that contends “all men are created equal”). In the examples contained in subsequent chapters, I illustrate how contemporary topical humorists continue this tradition of both maintaining and critiquing national values, and how both actions serve to unify the country despite its diverse population.

Form (monologue) and content (current events) are not the only similarities that contemporary humorists have with traditional American humorists. A focus on violence and terror has been a major theme that runs throughout the nation’s humor (Rourke 1931, 37; Yates 1964, 354). These themes stem from the fear that accompanies the uncertainty of waging a war against a colonial power, to the anxiety experienced by expanding west into hostile territory, to a despair felt at becoming a faceless human in the age of machines, to a nuclear terror generated by the Cold War. Similar to national values, shared fears frequently serve as the focus for topical humorists who seek out the most timely and trenchant issues facing the country. This is why it should come as no surprise that the events of September 11, and how the country responded to continued threats of terrorism, eventually worked their way onto late night television and The Onion.

Anxiety, dread, terror and despair are emotional phases that come to the fore when tragic events occur. For topical humorists, events that engender fear and loathing must be addressed because the nation requires relief. At a very minimum, humor helps to purge negative emotions and provide a release from the angst felt over tragedies. But humor also has the ability to aid in the acceptance of tragic events and to forge an adaptation to a changed world. Thus, using a tragedy such as 9/11 as a focus in topical humor is not as unsavory or even unusual as it might initially appear. For example, a plethora of jokes appeared immediately after the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger in January of 1986. The majority of these jokes related to the
teacher on board, Christa McAuliffe, and referenced her lack of knowledge about the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). One example should illustrate the general tone of the jokes: What were Christa McAuliffe’s last words? “Hey guys, what’s this button?”

While the jokes related to the *Challenger* disaster were widely dismissed as being in poor taste, scholarly analysis of the humor demonstrates that more is at work in these popular discourses than mere impropriety. In her book, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*, Constance Penley determined that it was no accident that most jokes were made at the expense of McAuliffe. Penley asserts that the public made fun of the citizen-astronaut because NASA had already exhibited a bias against women in the space program and these jokes reflect this negative attitude (Penley 1997, 23). In a separate study about the *Challenger* jokes, Patrick D. Morrow asserts that the series of quips are public expressions of “anger, betrayal, and intense disillusionment” over the failure of an American agency and advanced technology (Morrow 1987, 181).

Penley and Morrow offer alternative readings of the jokes, but they need not be mutually exclusive. Their different analyses illuminate a connection among popular culture, contemporary context and national values. Jokes about a tragedy, no matter how crass they may initially appear, reflect social values as well as institutional and public attitudes. Indeed, the fact that jokes appear to be in poor taste only serves to highlight the fact that “the boundary of good taste” still exists (Morrow 1987, 182). For those who question how jokes could be made at the expense of the *Challenger* disaster, Alan Dundes queries: “How can one not joke about such a tragedy?” (Dundes 1987, 75).

In addition to being informative, entertaining and a unifying discourse, jokes are also society’s release valve when tragic events or uncontrollable circumstances occur that cannot be
easily explained or prevented. Dundes has examined joke cycles in relation to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the *Challenger* explosion, the nuclear reactor meltdown in Chernobyl, and the AIDS pandemic. He contends: “The available evidence strongly suggests that sick joke cycles constitute a kind of collective mental hygiene defense mechanism that allows people to cope with the most dire of disasters, natural or otherwise” (Dundes 1987, 73).

There were certainly sick jokes made about September 11; however, this study examines mainstream humor relating to the attacks, humor that had to be approved by audiences and advertisers alike, which does not necessarily preclude sick humor.

Contrary to collective memory or assumptions about societal propriety, topical humorists immediately addressed the terrorist attacks of September 11. The tragedy loomed large in the national consciousness and relief was required, as well as adaptation to a changed world that included terrorist threats within the country. Humor relating to and stemming from the attacks of 9/11 should be considered in line with the tradition of American humor that acts as a release valve in times of crisis. This practice is consistent with the national proclivity to joke about tragic events as a means to maintain unity and to identify those values capable of facilitating transcendence.

Humor in the United States reflects and questions national values as a means to clarify our ideals and establish a common culture. This occurs through the simultaneous referencing and mocking of shared social values noted above. Topical humorists are especially vital in this regard as they bring current events into a broader context with past events and contemporary values, which serves to critique existing practices and institutions and to interrogate foundational principles. Additionally, topical humor about 9/11 helped audiences to transcend the immediate tragedy by allowing for an emotional release of fear and anxiety, in addition to facilitating
adjustment to a changed world. Tragedy requires not only transcendence, but also adaptation. Topical humorists on late night television and The Onion provided both relief and the tools to adapt to an ever-changing world after 9/11, following in the tradition of humor dating back to the founding of the United States. The modes of transmission have expanded, but the core content of topical humor remains consistent: current events put into context with shifting social values.

**Rhetorical Tradition of Humor**

In addition to being a part of the American tradition, humor is also a part of the rhetorical tradition. There is an ancient connection between humor and rhetoric, and it is important to explore this relationship explicitly in order to create a rhetorical foundation for this contemporary study of comedy produced in the wake of September 11, 2001. The imbrication between comedy and rhetoric is frequently overlooked in rhetorical scholarship, even though the subject was addressed in significant works, such as Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *The Rhetoric*, the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium, De Oratore* by Cicero, and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. These authors often use similar terms or strategies when describing both comedy and rhetoric, indicating that a long-standing relationship exists between the two discourses. I examine these canonical texts to establish the rhetorical nature of humor.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that he prefers the craft of tragedy and epic poetry to that of comedy (Aristotle 1984, 1447a-49b:19). However, there are some relevant passages dealing with humor that likely influenced Roman theories of the comic. Within the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle cites Gorgias as an authority on the topic of jests when he states: “These [jests] are supposed to be of some service in controversy. Gorgias said that you should kill your opponents’ earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness; in which he was right” (Aristotle 1984, 1419b:1). Further, Aristotle posits that the difference between buffoonery and irony is that the former is not
befitting a gentleman and seeks to please others, while the latter is proper for a gentleman in
that he amuses himself (Aristotle 1984, 5-9). This distinction highlights that comedy may be
used for various purposes and is also subject to cultural rules of propriety.

Aristotle addresses the topic of comedy in more detail in the *Poetics*, making a
connection between rhetoric and comedy. He writes: “As for Comedy, it is (as has been
observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and
every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of
the Ugly” (Aristotle 1984, 1449a:32-33). Comedy is used not to cause pain or harm, but rather
to “excite laughter” (Aristotle 1984, 1449a:32), which can help gain an audience’s favor or hold
its attention when trying to persuade a group of people, a main goal of rhetoric. Thus, while
Aristotle does not fully treat the topic of comedy within any of his existing treatises, he does
contend that comedy should be used to mock ridiculous faults in order to get a laugh out of the
audience – one means to gain approval and as an orator.

The *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, written by an unknown author circa. 82 B.C., echoes some
of Aristotle’s thoughts concerning humor. In discussing the “subtle approach” to craft the
introduction to an oration, the auctor suggests that humor should be used if “the hearers have
been fatigued by listening” (Anonymous 1999, I:10). This is similar to Aristotle’s categorization,
in a section related to interrogation, that jests excite laughter; but the auctor places humor within
a section on introductions, suggesting multiple functions and places for comedy in rhetorical
texts. The auctor also lists the potential sources of humor to be used in an introduction:

- a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion of the
- meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naiveté, an
- exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a
- comparison, a novel tale, a historical anecdote, a verse, or a
- challenge or a smile of approbation directed at someone. Or we
shall promise to speak otherwise than as we have prepared, and not to talk as others usually do (Anonymous 1999, I:10-11).

This list conveys a myriad of ways that an orator can use comedy to benefit a particular cause. Indeed, the varieties of humor seem to mirror the varieties of persuasive appeals generally, a point to which I will return shortly.

Our unknown auctor also includes some thoughts about humor under the heading of memory. The *Ad Herennium* notes that nature provides cues on what is memorable and what is not. We may not remember petty or ordinary things, he writes, “[b]ut if we see or hear something exceptionally base, dishonourable, extraordinary, great, unbelievable, or laughable, that we are likely to remember a long time” (Anonymous 1999, III:35-36). Therefore, humor helps to activate memory within individuals, certainly practical information for an orator who wants to make a lasting impression on an audience. The auctor further writes that we “ought, then, to set up images of a kind that adhere longest in the memory [by] assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that, too, will ensure our remembering them more readily” (Anonymous 1999, III:37). Comedy serves as a means to favorably dispose an audience to a cause, according to both Aristotle and this unknown auctor, and humor further serves as an aid to memory, as noted in the *Ad Herennium*.

A contemporary of the auctor of the *Ad Herennium*, and once the suspected writer of same, Cicero addresses the topic of humor in some detail in his book, *De Oratore*, completed in 55 B.C. (Cicero 2001, 3). Cicero introduces a seasoning metaphor to describe humor in a presentation of a long list of training exercises that an orator must practice in order to be successful: “And from all types of urbanity we must take bits of witticism and humor that we can sprinkle, like a little salt, throughout all of our speech” (Cicero 2001, 1:159). Amplifying this
analogy of humor to salt, comedy adds spice to oratorical works, and what self-respecting
orator would want to be bland? Interestingly, Cicero also notes that wit is as important a quality
in an orator as “appropriate voice and delivery” (Cicero 2001, 1:213).

In Book 2 of *De Oratore*, Cicero has his interlocutor Antonius encourage Caesar to speak
on the topic of wit by claiming that humor and witticisms do not require any art, and are instead
naturally given talents (Cicero 2001, 2:216). Caesar then states that previous textbooks that
sought to teach humor failed miserably and were laughable in and of themselves for their poor
instruction (Cicero 2001, 2:218), which is similar to dismissive comments made about rhetorical
handbooks at the time. Caesar then outlines two types of witticism: “one that is spread evenly
throughout the whole discourse, and another that is pointed and concise. The ancients called the
former banter and the latter sharp-wittedness” (Cicero 2001, 2:218). Caesar notes that these
“trivial” names refer to a “trivial” business; however, he admits that great accomplishments have
been achieved in trials through the use of humor, and he agrees with Antonius that wit comes
from nature rather than instruction (Cicero 2001, 2:218).

Cicero specifically references an Aristotelian idea concerning humor when he has Caesar
describe the source of humor: “The seat, the region, so to speak, of the humorous . . . lies in a
certain dishonorableness and ugliness” (Cicero 2001, 2:236). The rousing of laughter helps an
orator to portray himself as “refined . . . educated . . . well bred,” as well as to relax an audience
or to dismiss “offensive matters that are not easily refuted by argument” (Cicero 2001, 2:236).
Cicero used humor in some of his own defense cases, for example the *Pro Caelio*, where he
countered charges against his client with comedic levity instead of traditional legal arguments or
refutations.

Caesar then compares the use of humor by an orator with that of a buffoon by stating:
So the practice of taking the occasion into account, and restraint and moderation when we are actually employing our sharp-wittedness, together with economy in our use of witty sayings will distinguish the orator from the buffoon; as also will the fact that we orators utter them for a specific reason, that is, not to seem funny, but to achieve something, while buffoons go on all day without any reason at all (Cicero 2001, 2:247, emphasis added).

I suggest here that the distinction between orator and buffoon with respect to sharp-wittedness can also refer to the difference between a rhetor and a person engaged in idle conversation. In other words, this passage refers to employing humor in contingent and specific circumstances to achieve an end, just as the craft of rhetoric must take into account “occasion . . . restraint and moderation” for successful persuasion to occur.

As a further support for the claim that Cicero defines humor in a manner similar to that of rhetoric, he states: “There is no category of jokes that is not also a source for earnest and serious thoughts” (Cicero 2001, 2:250). The same sources of topics that exist for sober matters of importance also serve as potential sources of invention for jokes or wit. Referring again to his seasoning metaphor, an orator must know how to properly season his speech to make sure that it attains a level of appropriateness: not too salty and not too bland.

Quintilian advances an argument concerning the importance of propriety in oratory in his series of 12 books, *Institutio Oratoria*, which repeatedly stress how vital it is to balance art, virtue and practice in order to strike the perfect level of appropriateness for all speaking situations. Quintilian lived and wrote in the first century A.D., and he devotes a lengthy chapter in Book 6 to the topic of laughter. While one may assert that Quintilian dealt with every topic in detail and that humor should not be singled out as gaining in importance over time, it is worth noting that he devotes more attention to humor than do the theorists previously discussed. Not only did comedy gain respectability as a theatrical performance over these intervening years, but
comedy likely would have increased in importance for orators because they would address the same crowds accustomed to enjoying staged comedies, thus raising expectations for the use of humor within oratory.

Like the auctor of the *Ad Herennium*, Quintilian feels that humor should be used to refresh a tired judge, and he also contends that there are no exercises to practice nor any teachers of humor to help students learn how to be funny (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 1). Not surprisingly, Quintilian has much in common with Cicero in that Quintilian contends “there is no one principle by which laughter is aroused” (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 6), and he quotes Cicero to note that humor relates to ugliness. Further, Quintilian states that locating defects in others is urbanity, while referring jokingly to oneself is foolishness (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 8). These statements seem to contradict Aristotle’s definitions of irony and buffoonery, perhaps indicating that self-mocking was no longer appropriate for an orator in Quintilian’s time. In any case, it would seem that humor has always adapted to social values in order to be accepted.

Further echoing Cicero’s writings on humor, Quintilian posits that humor “mainly depends on nature and on opportunity” (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 12), much like Cicero’s advice to always keep in mind the occasion that elicits oratory when devising witty remarks. Quintilian outlines six categories of laughter: urbanity, charm, salty, facetious, jokes, and wit (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 17-21). The use of the term salty brings to mind Cicero’s comparison of the seasoning to wit. Quintilian defines this term as:

> What is ‘not insipid,’ a sort of simple seasoning of speech, perceived by an unconscious judgment – by the palate as it were – which stimulates and saves a speech from becoming tedious. For, just as salt generously sprinkled over food, if not in excess, gives a pleasure all its own, so this ‘salt’ of speech has a quality which gives us a thirst for listening (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 17-21).
Quintilian’s comparison of “unconscious judgment” to a palate is similar to his position that truly great orators must avoid outwardly displaying their art in order to mask the appearance of striving too hard for perfection, indicating that it is a skill to both perform and conceal the display of art within oratory (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 4.1, 57), just as salt should be used in the right amount to make listeners thirsty, but fall short of conscious detection by their palates. Additionally, that Quintilian identifies six types of humor illustrates both the complexity and breadth of comedy that can be used toward rhetorical ends within public discourse.

Quintilian does not merely parrot Cicero or others’ ideas in his series of books, but also introduces some new concepts relating to the theorization of humor. Specifically, Quintilian observes that the ridiculous can emerge from actions or from words, thereby making a distinction between physical humor and verbal wit (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 25). This division would have been evidenced during Quintilian’s time as high or low forms, mimes being a low form of physical comedy, while staged comedies and oratorical wit would have held a higher status. Contemporarily, these divisions remain relevant in certain popular culture genres, with the majority of verbal satire holding a higher status than situation comedies or mimes.

Looking again to the Rhetorica ad Herennium, I will use the five canons of rhetoric detailed in this text to bridge the practices of rhetoric and humor: invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. As previously noted, both Cicero and Quintilian include their discussions relating to humor within their sections on invention; both contend that there are as many ways to argue gravely as humorously; and both claim that any serious topic can be examined from a comedic perspective. Because of this, it seems clear that finding sources for humor is a process of invention, comparable and equal to that of locating “serious” topics. Moreover, inventing humor relating to a national tragedy necessarily involves additional challenges for a comedian.
While distance in time from 9/11 seemingly lessened our national sensitivities about the tragedy and opened up more opportunities for humor, how humorists choose to frame the terrorist attacks both memorializes and contextualizes the events in a particular manner.

As for arrangement, Aristotle includes the topic of jests within his section on interrogation, indicating that humor can be used within this part of a forensic appeal. Further, even though Cicero and Quintilian address humor under the heading of invention, the manner in which they refer to the myriad ways that humor can be inserted into works of oratory would necessarily affect how the parts of a speech are arranged. Specifically, the salt metaphor introduced by Cicero and amplified by Quintilian implies that humor should be sprinkled throughout an entire speech, which suggests that arrangement is an important element for both rhetoric and comedy. With respect to humor relating to 9/11, arrangement and “saltiness” become particularly difficult rhetorical choices. For example, what will be foregrounded: a warning against future terrorist attacks imbedded within a work of satire, or physical comedy relating to new airport regulations? My selections of topical humor from this time period will illustrate how arrangement is as vital to works of comedy as it is to more traditional rhetorical texts.

The canon of style can also be applied to humor, as further implied by the use of the salt metaphor. Quintilian advises his pupils that this seasoning should not overpower the judge’s palate but should remain hidden. Such artifice is required for the overall style of an orator – funny or somber – according to Quintilian, as noted above with references to hiding one’s rhetorical skill lest it be discerned and discarded by an audience. This same style of concealment must also be used with humor. Audiences do not respond well to recycled jokes and prefer humor to at least appear spontaneous and timely in order to generate laughter. Comedy relating
to current events should always be “new,” but the repetition of similar events within human
history (e.g. tragedies) allows for the repetition of some jokes. Because of this, humor at times
projects an overlap of temporality – past and present – which helps to determine a work of
comedy’s overall style.

The auctor of the *Ad Herennium* addresses the canon of memory, noting how humor
functions to help an audience to remember things more readily than if they were introduced in a
more common or quotidian fashion. The *Ad Herennium* also notes that humor helps an orator to
remember his own arguments. The auctor of this textbook further contends that memory is “the
treasure-house of the ideas supplied by Invention . . . the guardian of all of the parts of rhetoric”
(Anonymous 1999, III, 28), which implicates memory’s importance for not just invention, but all
of the canons of rhetoric. The unknown auctor urges rhetors to view memory as the overarching
goal of rhetoric, and humor has the unique ability to both activate recollection of past events and
help audiences to better remember humorous texts in the future.

The auctor also references humor’s ability to refresh an audience, which would help them
to receive an oration favorably. Cicero does not mention this specifically in *De Oratore*, but in
one of his own speeches, *Pro Caelio*, he used humor to keep the 75 judges at Marcus Caelius’
trial interested in his defense while a festival occurred around them (Geffcken 1973, 11).
Quintilian, like the auctor, also explicitly states humor’s benefits to refresh a judge and positively
dispose an audience, both of which encourage retention of ideas and arguments. Humor serves
to gain the attention of an audience and enables them to remember arguments made in a comedic
vein. This not only affects future interactions with discourse relating to the same topic, but also
necessarily impacts how audiences remember the topic being mocked.
Quintilian connects the final canon, delivery, with humor in his observation that comedy can be expressed in words or actions, the two major components of delivery. Further, Quintilian notes that the same methods of elocution and invention apply to oratory and humor, as they both involve words and/or gestures. Cicero again demonstrates this within his speech, *Pro Caelio*, when he repeatedly mimes a mysterious transaction involving a transfer of poison that occurred at the baths among Licinius and Clodia’s slaves (Cicero 1965, XXVI, 63-67). Cicero refers to the incident as a “mime, not of a proper play” (Cicero 1965, XXVI, 65), suggesting a distinction between high and low comedy later noted by Quintilian. Different levels of humor still exist, satire being held in higher regard than a physical impersonation of an important person. However, the choice of whether or not to engage in high or low comedy is a rhetorical one, as are applications of each of the canons of rhetoric in the production of works of humor. Such decisions depend upon the audience and the context surrounding the discourse, making topical humor subject to the same rhetorical choices as other examples of public discourse.

Not only was humor addressed within classical rhetorical handbooks, but the function of humor in ancient times was also considered to hold persuasive potential. For example, Elizabeth O’Regan contends that the function of Attic comedy during the 5th Century B.C. was both “fantasy” and “political tool” (O'Regan 1992, 4). O’Regan examined a work by Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, but her assessment is useful beyond this single play. Indeed, O’Regan contends that *terpsis*, the rhetorical pleasure experienced by the audience of a well-crafted speech, can combine with the pleasure received from witnessing a well-crafted work of comedy to allow for a positive and long-lasting audience response (O'Regan 1992, 126). Both persuasive discourse and comedy rely on the arrangement of words to clearly communicate an idea or joke. O’Regan notes the “paradox that Socrates and Aristophanes have their verbal tools and respect for
language in common, that those who can appreciate one will be the best audience of the other” (O'Regan 1992, 126).

That audiences are exposed to both serious and humorous texts simultaneously is not a new phenomenon in our post-modern world (e.g. the genre of “dramedy” on television and in movies). O’Regan notes that ancient audiences were more sophisticated – not more confused - because of their concurrent exposure to distinct and perhaps competing genres. Indeed, O’Regan’s contention that philosophy and humor are united in an attempt to provide pleasure through speech is an interesting observation, which suggests that a well crafted fusing of the serious and humorous has the potential to make a significant impression with an audience. Indeed, the classical textbooks quoted thus far also seem to support the contention that humor can strengthen persuasive appeals in a myriad of ways.

While my discussion thus far is by no means exhaustive concerning the ancient relationship between comedy and rhetoric, it both supports and suggests research into contemporary works of humor. Certainly, rhetorical handbooks and theories from other eras should be mined for references to humor (e.g. Scottish Enlightenment), but my purpose in examining Latin and Roman works is to establish humor as a rhetorical discourse. That the same canon could potentially apply to both rhetoric and comedy also needs further examination, especially with respect to how persuasion can be heightened through the use of humor. More specifically, I contend that the creation and reception of serious and comedic texts are subject to the same rhetorical constraints and that both have the potential to influence broader public discussions relating to a particular event or person. I hope that this study of topical humor produced one year after September 11 encourages additional scholarship on how this discourse functions rhetorically.
Theoretical Overview/Literature Review

Contemporary examples of topical humor are consistent with the established tradition of American humor. Additionally, classical rhetorical theory suggests that humor should be considered a form of rhetorical discourse. However, my analyses of humor produced by Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live,” and The Onion for the period of one-year after September 11 will require additional theoretical frames that go beyond pointing out similarities to other discourses. Topical humor relating to a tragedy is not an aberration in the United States and so it merits consideration as a recurring rhetorical discourse. However, merely asserting that humor is recurring and rhetorical is not sufficient to explain fully the role of topical humor in the United States after a tragedy. Topical humor is persuasive, but how this discourse functions as a public discourse requires a theoretical apparatus beyond that explored in classical rhetorical handbooks or the tradition of American humor.

Humor is a discourse that cuts across many academic disciplines: philosophy, psychology, literature, history (especially topical humor that conveys attitudes about past events), anthropology, communication studies, and health, to name some of the largest educational divisions that engage in humor scholarship. Fusing a theory that would satisfy all of these diverse types of academic inquiries is a challenge. Locating my particular foundation in rhetorical theory is a beginning, but considering the disparate studies coming from other disciplines, it cannot end there. In order to allow for a broader method of inquiry, I bring together bodies of literature from classical rhetorical theory (noted above), humor theory, and literary theory. Finally, I argue that topical humor is a form of epideictic discourse.
Humor Theory

There are various theories that purport to explain the function of humor in society, with some disagreement stemming from a controversy regarding whether humor is a cognitive process, an emotional one, or both. Three main explanatory concepts have emerged in the literature on humor: superiority, relief and incongruity. Superiority, which was first advanced by Plato and Aristotle, and then championed by Hobbes, contends that we laugh when we feel better than someone else. Charles Gruner, a rhetorical scholar, contends that human superiority over others is at the heart of all instances of humor. However, Gruner distinguishes humor from wit and contends that the latter is an intellectual process, leading him to equate humor with poetics and wit with rhetoric (Gruner 1965, 18). Such a conception seems to indicate that humor can be either cognitive (wit) or emotional (aesthetics), and Gruner suggests that a blend of emotions and intellect is required for humor relying upon superiority. However, this equation limits the range of human feelings or thoughts to those related to hubris because the foundation for feelings of superiority rest on pride.

The relief theory of humor assumes that emotions are at the center of humor production and reception. Most closely associated with Sigmund Freud and his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, this theory combines both psychology and aesthetics as a means to theorize the function of jokes in society (Freud [1905] 1960, 9). Freud contends that jokes are similar to dreams because both are involuntary and do not follow logical patterns of reasoning (Freud [1905] 1960, 167). Essentially, humor provides pleasure because it is illogical and suppresses critical thought: “Reason, critical judgement, suppression – these are the forces against which it [a joke] fights in succession” (Freud [1905] 1960, 137). For Freud, jokes and humor are a means
to transcend and/or transgress social taboos, namely sexual aggression and hostility. When social restrictions create tensions in the public sphere, they are released through a process of joking.

The third theory, incongruity, was first hinted at by Aristotle, but was more firmly defined and fleshed out by contemporary theorists like John Morreall, who writes: “for the incongruity theory amusement is an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical or inappropriate” (Morreall 1983, 15). When we are exposed to contradictory or contrasting images or concepts, individuals receive pleasure by recognizing the incongruity. A deeper level of satisfaction may occur if we are able to also realign the disparate elements contained in an incongruous observation. Personal experience and intelligence are required to process incongruous humor, but the privileging of cognitive processing is at the expense of the emotional release described by Freud. But people do laugh to release tensions of all kinds, as well as enjoy feeling superior to other people from time to time. Thus, none of the three theories is comprehensive and cannot account for or explain all instances of humor. However, they are also not incompatible with one another.

While it is generally agreed upon that humor induces pleasure in audiences, a tension exists between the belief that asserts that humor provides pleasure through individual intellect and the belief that that humor provides pleasure because of a release of emotions. Intellect and emotion need not be antithetical with respect to humor, and both must be accounted for when examining humor relating to a national tragedy. Dana Sutton has forged a theory of humor that fuses both Freud and Aristotle, surely an intriguing mix for any rhetorical scholar. In her book, *The Catharsis of Comedy*, Sutton uses Aristotle’s tragic catharsis as a foundation from which to
build her theory by combining it with Freud’s concept that humor is a release from societal taboos (Sutton 1994).

Asserting that humor is both intellectual and emotional, Sutton outlines a process of purgation stemming from humor that provides a catharsis in the audience. Her theory is this: a humorist selects a comic surrogate that resembles a target capable of evoking negative feelings in the audience. These negative feelings can be anxiety, fear, sexual aggression and hostility – emotions that are a combination of Aristotle’s tragic catharsis and Freudian societal taboos. The purgation process occurs on two levels. The first is when an audience recognizes the negative emotion being purged by the surrogate, provoking laughter and a sense of pleasure due to the fact that one or more of the four negative emotions is built up and then released. The second, deeper level of purgation occurs when audience members recognize that the surrogate represents an actual target in real life, and this transference allows for not only purgation of the negative emotion, but also an educational experience with the potential for inoculation against the target’s ability to provoke similar bad feelings in the future.

The example given by Sutton that helps explain this process in a condensed form is an editorial cartoon that depicts Richard Nixon’s nose in an exaggerated fashion. The surrogate and target are obviously closely related, so it is not hard to make the transference of bad feelings from one to the other. Sutton contends that laughing at the President’s pronounced proboscis enables one to feel superior to the image, which can serve as a means to inhibit future feelings of anxiety when exposed to the actual person. Audiences may find a large nose funny in and of itself, but the underlying connection to the President of the United States allows for another level of release than merely laughing at an exaggerated body part. This example illustrates how
superiority, relief, and incongruity can be at work within one single and simple instance of humorous discourse.

Sutton’s theory about humor as a catharsis that requires intellect and emotional processes is important with respect to humor related to a tragedy, like that produced in the wake of 9/11. Negative emotions were running high in the nation immediately after the attacks, and while release of these feelings was desired, propriety also had to be maintained in order not to disrespect those who lost their lives on that tragic day. This required a delicate balance between intellect and emotion, and Sutton’s concept of a surrogate and its potential to prevent future bad feelings is applicable to my analyses of topical humor for the period of one year after the attacks.

In addition to the ways that intellect and emotion work in examples of humor, timing is another important factor that must be addressed in this study. The production of humor was vastly more difficult on September 11, 2001 than it was on September 10, 2001. Additionally, the production and reception of topical humor changed over the course of the year after the attacks. In his examination of the jokes made in the wake of the Challenger explosion, Patrick Morrow explains the cycle as a social process similar to how an individual would deal with a “long-term, debilitating, and not fatal illness” (Morrow 1987, 182). In contrast to the five stage Kübler-Ross paradigm that describes the grieving process (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), Morrow cites three phases that a person diagnosed with a permanent disease, such as Multiple Sclerosis, goes through: “anger, acceptance, and adaptation” (Morrow 1987, 182).

The tragic events of September 11 brought about the deaths of almost three thousand people, and surely their friends and families went through the five stages of grief described by Kübler-Ross. However, the rest of the nation did not experience personal loss. Rather, the country was infected with the long-term illness of terrorism, a disease that had already struck
most of Europe and the Middle East. Therefore, my examination of topical humor over the
course of one year after 9/11 is divided into three chapters, each of which will illustrate how the
United States moved from anger and other negative emotions, to acceptance of the reality of the
attacks, and finally to a stage of adaptation toward the changed world that includes an ongoing
war on terror. The nation went through each phase with the help of topical humorists who relied
upon intellect and emotion to bring about the changes required to adapt to the realization that
terrorism was a permanent condition.

Literary Theory

Just as the superiority, relief and incongruity theories are not broad enough to explain the
function of humor, Sutton’s catharsis of comedy and Morrow’s three stages of “black” humor are
not fully sufficient to examine humor one year after September 11. I look now to literary theory,
specifically to Kenneth Burke, as a means to expand my theoretical construct. Burke focuses on
the comic as an attitude. This position was first outlined in Attitudes Toward History, but over
his career, Burke noted that the “comic frame” was “mankind’s only hope” (Burke 1969, 20), the
“attitude of attitudes . . . the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever
on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy” (Burke [1937] 1984, Introduction).

Kenneth Burke began to develop the concept of the comic frame in his discussion of the
poetic category of comedy:

Like tragedy, comedy warns against the dangers of pride, but its emphasis shifts from crime to stupidity. . . . The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. . . . Comedy requires the maximum of forensic complexity. . . . Comedy must develop logical forensic causality to
its highest point, calling not upon astronomical marvels to help shape the plot,
but completing the process of internal organization, whereby each
event is deduced ‘syllogistically’ from the premises of the
informing situation. Comedy deals with man in society, tragedy
with the cosmic man (Burke [1937] 1984, 41-42).

Burke establishes that comedy deals with humans acting in the world. Further, he asserts that in
the use of the comic frame there are no victims, only mistakes; no scapegoats but comic clowns.
Perhaps most significantly, Burke points to the “forensic complexity” of comedy that allows this
discourse to point out the mistakes taking place in society and to encourage their correction.
Burke considers the comic frame “mankind’s only hope” because it encourages the building of
communities rather than accusations and blame. In the comic frame, actions are encouraged over
passivity.

The comic frame is capable of viewing comedy and tragedy simultaneously – and this
attitude is vital to contemporary life since it frequently requires citizens to process tragic and
comic events simultaneously. The expanded view that humor provides is what Kenneth Burke
calls a “perspective by incongruity, [which] . . . is not negative smuggling, but positive cards-
face-up-on-the-table. It is designed to ‘remoralize’ by accurately naming a situation already
demoralized by inaccuracy” (Burke [1937] 1984, 309). More importantly, Burke’s focus on an
attitude rather than a specific discourse privileges audience responses because anything can be
humorous when viewed through a comic lens. Indeed, in a modern era often described as
absurd, it may be difficult for a professional humorist to compete with real world events for
humorous content. A summary by current events writer Moshe Waldocks during a random week
in 1994 illustrates this:

I am writing in a week when Olympic skater Tonya Harding was
under suspicion for conspiring to break Nancy Kerrigan’s knee;
Lorena Bobbitt was found temporarily insane when she sliced off
her husband’s penis; . . . afternoon talk shows were devoted to body-piercing for teenagers and s/m marriage ceremonies; . . . Dan Quayle appeared in a Lay’s potato(e?) chip commercial; Staten Island was thinking of seceding from New York City; Bill Clinton made a Reaganesque State of the Union speech, leaving the Republicans not quite speechless; and did I mention that Tonya Harding was still under suspicion of conspiring to break Nancy Kerrigan’s knee? Now try to be funny after all that. (Walker 1998, 62-63).

Topical humorists highlight important incongruities and bring particular news stories to the attention of their audiences, but a comic attitude expands the number of subjects that can be tolerated as the focal point of jokes. Topical humorists foster a comic attitude in audiences through their discourses, a process which facilitates dealing with the absurdities and tragedies of daily living.

In the most tragic of circumstances, like September 11, success for humor cannot be judged according to the amount of laughter a work of comedy receives. What becomes more important than the “ha-ha” factor is the “a-ha” factor: the shift in perspective provided by a humorous text that does not belittle the event or our emotions but allows for a broader perception of crises that enables individuals to move beyond their negative emotions. Burke’s focus on the attitude provided by the comic frame does not center upon a response such as laughter or the discursive intent of a producer. To borrow Morrow’s terms, the comic attitude employed by topical humorists helps audiences move from anger to acceptance to adaptation.

**Epideictic Rhetoric**

Humor is a form of rhetorical discourse in both theory and practice, as outlined above in my examination of some classical rhetorical handbooks. However, I want to claim more specifically that topical humor is form of epideictic discourse. Aristotle describes epideictic discourse as being a mixture of present, past and future: “The ceremonial orator is, properly
speaking, concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time, though they often find it useful also to recall the past and to makes [sic] guesses at the future” (Aristotle 1984, 1358b). This negotiation of the present with past and future events occurs in topical humor that addresses current events within a framework of shared values from the past as they relate to current and potential future actions.

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to epideictic rhetoric as “a central part of the art of persuasion” because of its potential to influence “the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 49-50). Topical humor relies on shared values in the construction of comedic enthymemes, humorous observations that require audience participation to complete the discourse and create meaning. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe this relationship between producers and receivers of epideictic rhetoric: “The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement. . . . In epideictic oratory, the speaker turns educator” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 50). Topical humor’s reliance on current events as a source of invention lends itself to informing audiences about matters of importance in the public sphere, while also putting them into context with past and future events and attitudes.

The discourse of topical humor is a popular and an effective means to inform and influence public discussions relating to current events. As a form of epideictic rhetoric, topical humor also allows for the negotiation of social values in a context of current events. Just as the Yankee used wit and wisdom to create a common identity within a fledgling nation, Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion use common sense and a sense of humor as a
means to perpetuate and/or critique assumed social principles. Because of this complexity, topical humor works on at least two levels – or uses a double-voice as noted above – simultaneously. Topical humor addresses matters relating to tragedy, comedy and the mundane as a means to entertain or inform and to encourage change or call for steadfastness by looking to the past or future.

The texts under examination in this dissertation all provide relief from the tragedy of 9/11, but they are also rhetorical discourses that provide information about current events and facilitate the adoption of an attitude best able to deal with the reality of terrorism. Topical humor is more than what it seems, always operating in at least two registers. Two recent examples of scholarship dealing with humor on late night television exemplifies the complexity of this discourse by arguing that humor can function as a form of political arguments and a form of journalism, respectively. Chris Smith and Ben Voth contend that “Saturday Night Live” produced political arguments about the candidates in the 2000 Presidential election. “Saturday Night Live” served as a “critical synthetic role in informing political views,” and that “[l]argely attributable to the influence of ‘SNL,’ the first debate created an interpretive mold and precedent for humor in the political sphere” (Smith 2002, 114). Not only did the parody\(^4\) of the debate influence voters’ opinions concerning the candidates, but the use of humor as a means to inform voters about political issues was also established.

Geoffrey Baym contends that “The Daily Show”\(^5\) is actually a reinvention of the journalistic process, a necessary evolution due to an erosion of the media’s willingness to fully investigate news stories in the wake of September 11 (Baym 2005, 259). Baym’s contention that

\(\text{\footnotesize 4}\) Parody refers to a humorous imitation of a person or an exaggeration of style/format. 
\(\text{\footnotesize 5}\) I examine this show in Chapter 2, but I was unable to acquire transcripts for the entire year after September 11 despite many attempts to contact Comedy Central, the producers of “The Daily Show,” and anyone who might have recorded the show from September 2001 to September 2002.
media outlets changed due to a fear of being named unpatriotic after 9/11 may be correct, but “The Daily Show” is surely not the only discourse that emerged to fill this perceived gap in journalistic output. Other topical humorists provided citizens with information that could be used to engage in informed public discussions. The format of the show Baym examines is that of a newscast, and the monologues that Leno and Letterman present each night reference current events and thus transmit information and attitudes about issues in the news. The Onion uses a traditional news format as the basis for all of its satire: the newspaper. Because of this, The Onion is very similar to “The Daily Show” in its parody of a traditional news form, as well as its focus on current events.

My theoretical apparatus may appear slightly unwieldy at this point, but a quick summary should help to illuminate how I plan to integrate all of these elements to analyze topical humor produced in the one-year period after September 11. The chapters will be divided into three major categories: anger, acceptance and adaptation. Rhetorical elements, primarily invention and memory, will be used to highlight the manner in which humor uses current and past events to entertain, educate and influence audience attitudes. Strategies will change as the year progresses and the nation’s attitudes shift from a need to release negative emotions like anger, to eventual acceptance of the reality of the terrorist attacks, and, finally, to adaptation to the global war on terror.

Dana Sutton’s theory on the catharsis of comedy will be employed to help determine the surrogate and the target of certain examples of topical humor. Initially, the two are almost wholly indistinguishable (e.g. Osama bin Laden), but as the year progresses, the target of humor becomes more elusive and the audience has to work a little harder to uncover the true object of humor on late night television and in The Onion. The change occurs due to the shifting
requirements of a nation that eventually moves from a negative emotional state to a newly formed status quo that requires the negotiation of cultural values in an age of terrorism.

I will also invoke Kenneth Burke’s comic frame throughout this work to illustrate how topical humorists influence national attitudes about current events. Like any rhetorical discourse, how a rhetor crafts a persuasive text is wholly dependent on the context of a given situation. Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion had to first acknowledge, and in some instances physically demonstrate, the emotions of the nation in order to continue in their roles as comic guardians during a tragic time. Permission had to be sought to again engage in seemingly frivolous endeavors, such as topical humor as a form of entertainment. The comic frame serves as a foil to and critique of both the tragic and heroic frames, an important function considering the gravity of the attacks and the expanding war on terror.

I will focus on topical humor as a form of epideictic rhetoric in my third and final core chapter that deals with the time period beginning eight months after September 11. While humor still acted in the cathartic manner outlined by Sutton, and also influenced audiences to take a comic attitude of the world as outlined in Burke’s comic frame, topical humor did not return to its customary function as a negotiation of national and cultural values until the United States had begun to adapt to the changes evinced by 9/11. By this time, the nation had entered a phase of adjustment that was both reflected and facilitated by topical humor, similar to the way that humor helped establish, reflect and critique the country’s core values in the aftermath of previous tragic occurrences.

While it may seem contradictory to examine humor in response to a tragedy, comedy has traditionally been used in this country as a healing and unifying discourse, even and perhaps especially in response to horrific events. Topical humor functions rhetorically because of its
reliance on audience beliefs, social context, and its epideictic form. I contend that topical humor is a public discourse that persuades and influences people’s attitudes every day, even during the tragic time period during the year after September 11, 2001. Viewing topical humor as epideictic rhetoric that informs and influences attitudes about events and national values illuminates an important body of texts for rhetorical scholars seeking to locate attitudes (or track shifting beliefs) during any time period in the history of the United States.
CHAPTER 2

IT’S ALL IN THE TIMING:
EMOTION AND INTELLECT IN TOPICAL HUMOR FOUR MONTHS POST-9/11

Because of their tragic scope and unexpectedness, the attacks on September 11, 2001 seemed to unite the citizens of the United States under a cloak of extreme emotions: grief, sadness, fear and anger. This unity, although not without its early dissenters, marked a departure from a previously fractured American identity stemming from dichotomies like North/South, rich/poor, and Bush/Gore. Devastation meted out on U.S. soil seemed to trump all previous issues of divisiveness, instituting a period marked by a mix of both mourning and national pride. Many businesses displayed the slogan “God Bless America” on their marqueses and individuals displayed flags on their homes, garages and vehicles, all of which seemed to indicate a unified citizenship.

This feeling of civic interconnectedness emerged from the shared emotions noted above. Those who personally lost friends and family experienced grief and sadness, feelings shared by the millions of people who watched the Twin Towers fall on cable and network news. The media’s focused attention on the attacks certainly contributed to a national cohesiveness and evoked strong affective responses, which emerged after repeated viewings of the attacks. Despite the vast selection of network and cable television channels, only one story existed the first week after September 11 and that was September 11. Fear of additional attacks due to the country’s acutely felt vulnerability was rampant, and anger also emerged in response to the devastation that took place within the country. What all of these emotions have in common – grief, sadness, fear, anger – is their consuming totality and potential to prevent emotional or cognitive distancing from the events of September 11.
While several extreme emotions were felt in the first four months after the terrorist attacks, the focus of this chapter is on anger. This emotion can range from mere annoyance to rage, and most citizens likely felt some level of anger in the aftermath of September 11 due to increased waits at airports and/or incredulity over the terrorists’ actions. In addition to being a common and unifying affective state within the country, anger also represents a necessary initial phase for society to deal with a tragedy. The Kübler-Ross paradigm is often used to track the stages of grief that precede the acceptance of a loved one’s death, with anger emerging after shock and denial. However, not everyone in the country knew someone who died as a result of September 11, and so it is not beneficial to apply the Kübler-Ross stages of extreme grief to the entire nation. Rather, the majority of the country experienced some fundamental changes in their everyday lives stemming from the actions of terrorists who hijacked airplanes and used them as weapons, and these too can be a source of anger.

In examining joke cycles in the United States that emerge in response to national tragedies, Patrick Morrow outlines three stages that individuals diagnosed with a debilitating but not fatal illness pass through: anger, acceptance and adaptation (Morrow 1987). Terrorism was the national diagnosis after September 11, and while some individuals did and will die as a result of this reality, the vast majority of citizens must accept, adapt and live with this prognosis. Anger emerged in response to the randomness of terrorist attacks, and the humor produced immediately after 9/11 references and draws upon the nation’s anger at the terrorists and the resulting changes that affected daily life in the United States.

In this chapter, I illustrate how topical humorists dealt with the extreme pathos felt by their audiences, especially the anger that emerged in response to the terrorist attacks in the country. Since topical humorists draw their material from the news, they could not avoid
addressing the events of September 11. The impact of the terrorist attacks made it a ubiquitous story in the aftermath of 9/11, and the initial forays into topical humor production for Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion reflected the seriousness of the nation’s emotional state that emerged in response to the terrorists’ actions. High emotions and temporal closeness to a tragic event affect the production of humor because they interfere with the reception of humor as both a form of entertainment and a source of information. In the case of 9/11, most topical humorists ceased production because of an assumption that audiences were not ready for humor, making this discourse unavailable for either entertainment or informative purposes. Topical humor produced between September 12, 2001 and January of 2002 had to address the extreme emotions that existed in the nation, specifically anger, in order to be accepted by audiences.

The relationship between humor and tragedy must be examined in order to set up the complex rhetorical situation producers of humor faced during this “anger phase” of topical humor after September 11. Topical humorists had to address and transcend anger, as well as other negative emotions, relating to the attacks of 9/11 in order for audiences to accept the existence of humor during a national tragedy. Before examining the primary texts of late night talk shows and written satire, I first explore the debate concerning whether humor is an emotional or an intellectual ability as a means to limn the boundaries of humor relating to a tragedy. Then, the comedic texts from this time frame will illustrate the use of anger and other negative emotions as a means to alter affective and intellectual perspectives relating to September 11. I will conclude by providing insights into how tragedy and comedy were able to coexist during the first four months after September 11, 2001, enabling topical humor to speak in a double voice.
John Morreall contends that in order for audiences to observe and appreciate the existence of incongruities, a main source of humor, audience members must be freed from practical concerns such as “fear, pity, moral disapprobation, indignation or disgust” (Morreall 1983, 19), “anger . . . and sadness” (Morreall 1999, 17), as well as maintain a “mental distance” from the object of humor being mocked (Morreall 1999, 18).6 This emotional disengagement and intellectual distance does not mean that consumers of humor are empty or passive shells, however. Rather, Morreall argues that a “conceptual shift” is required in order for humor to be enjoyed; we must experience a “psychological change” from a “negative . . . or nonemotional state to a positive emotional state” (Morreall 1983, 47-49). Hence, the production of humor during a time of crisis is fraught with difficulties because inspiring a positive cognitive shift from a negative emotional state is a difficult task.

While Morreall’s conceptual shift focuses on the proper conditions for the positive reception of humor not specific to a tragedy, it is certainly instructive concerning the more general production of humor in tragic circumstances. Topical humor had to address the national tragedy of 9/11 because of its central place in the national news; however, an overwhelming majority of the audience was sad, fearful or angry and thus not inclined to receive humor positively. Negative emotions affect individual receptions of topical humor, like the loss of a job or other examples of personal suffering. In Morreall’s description, comedy serves as a means of disengagement from bad experiences, personal or shared, and provides a means to gain cognitive

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6 Morreall relies heavily upon a contrast between comedy and tragedy in his assessment that comedy requires distance while tragedy calls for engagement – a relationship I will explore in the conclusion of this chapter. But it is interesting to note at this time that many of the characteristics of humor stem from its assumed status as diametrically opposed to tragedy, which causes some problems when analyzing humor in response to a tragic situation.
distance through an exposure to humorous discourse. In times of tragedy, the difficulty for
topical humorists is to encourage a change in attitude relating to an ordeal without trivializing the
tragic event, in essence fostering a positive psychological change in audiences.

It is important to note that Morreall’s theory asserts that humor potentially supplies a
catalyst to move from a state of negative emotions (e.g. fear, anger, sadness) to that of a more
positive mindset (e.g. adaptation and acceptance). Morreall’s theory aligns well with Morrow’s
contention that jokes in response to a tragedy follow a trajectory that moves from anger to
acceptance to adaptation. Indeed, Morreall’s theory seems to imply that humor can be thought of
as the catalyst that moves people through the stages. However, even in the most tragic of
circumstances, success for humor cannot be judged only according to the amount of laughter a
work of humor receives, but rather on how the humor helps audiences to transcend negative
psychological states that inhibit a proper perspective on current events. The focus of this chapter
is on how this initial shift away from overwhelming negative emotions occurred four months
after 9/11, a shift that was encouraged by topical humor. This expanded view that humor
provides is what Kenneth Burke calls “perspective by incongruity, [which] . . . is not negative
smuggling, but positive cards-face-up-on-the-table. It is designed to ‘remoralize’ by accurately
naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy” (Burke [1937] 1984, 309).

With respect to September 11, anger, sadness and fear are not necessarily “inaccurate”
responses to the situation, but such emotions do potentially distort individual perceptions and
inhibit a change in attitude required to transcend the negative affective state brought about by the
tragedy. In order for an accurate judgment to occur in the midst of such negative emotions,
humor helps to create a perspective by incongruity in audiences. Thus, Burke’s term can be seen
as a complement to Morreall’s “cognitive shift.” While incongruity is not the only form of
humor able to instill a change of perspective, Burke’s explication of how a combination of seemingly incompatible concepts can lead to a more informed perspective on certain events is a specific illustration of Morreall’s cognitive shift. Further, Burke’s perspective by incongruity outlines how humor provides an internal cognitive shift regardless of whether or not laughter is the physical response to an example of humor. Indeed, the act of producing humor in the wake of a tragedy can be considered an incongruity in and of itself.

Another manner in which Kenneth Burke expands humor from the realm of the physical act of laughter to an intellectual and potentially civic exercise is the concept of “maximum consciousness” (Burke [1937] 1984, 171). Burke contends that a comic frame “should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness” (Burke [1937] 1984, 171). This “maximum consciousness” is the aim of comic guardians, individuals who “warn individual actors, and the general public, of the doom that awaits those who violate the sacred principles of social order which uphold their community” (Duncan 1968, 98). This claim that the comic frame and its producers function to accurately inform citizens about their world and inspire civility may appear idealistic, but Burke advises that “a comic frame . . . show[s] us how an act can ‘dialectically’ contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both ‘service’ and ‘spoils’” (Burke [1937] 1984, 167).

A comic frame illuminates dialectical relationships, whether or not they are incongruous. Accounting for inherent dualities in all kinds of situations, Burke’s comic frame allows for situations to be simultaneously emotional and cognitive, as well as to contain both comic and tragic elements. Given this complexity, Burke’s term “comic frame” requires some additional interrogation. In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke advanced the idea that poetic categories can
serve as frames of meaning, each specific category offering “its own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meaning, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time” (Burke [1937] 1984, 34). One of the frames outlined by Burke, the comic, was subsequently employed by him on many occasions and represented for him “mankind’s only hope” to bring about peace and stability in modern society (Burke 1969, 20). For Burke, the comic frame is the “attitude of attitudes . . . the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy” (Burke [1937] 1984, Introduction). Again, Burke points to the dialectical nature of humanity. Since tragedy and comedy coexist, how we assess any given situation depends upon our attitude, which can be influenced by humorous texts that provide positive cognitive shifts, according to Morreall, or a perspective by incongruity, per Burke.

Burke’s focus is on the comic frame as an attitude while Morreall concentrates on comedy as being a catalyst in achieving that attitude. Burke seems to indicate that humor is a cognitive practice, but Morreall writes of comedy as both intellectual and emotional. This brings up a tension that is reflected in the theoretical literature about humor. Some view humor as an intellectual process while others focus on the emotional release that humor affords. The incongruity theory of humor privileges the intellectual elements of humor, while the relief theory asserts that humor is an emotional release. However, neither one of these theories is comprehensive enough to apply to every instance of humor (Morreall 1987, 38) as there are frequent instances when incongruity and relief overlap in the production and reception of humor, such as in the case of a national tragedy. The debate concerning whether humor is an intellectual or emotional process, even if unresolvable, is instructive in theorizing about the rhetorical functions of humor relating to a tragedy.
Making a broad statement concerning the necessity of humor for civilization, George Meredith contends that comedy and the comic idea must be able to flourish in order to “awaken thoughtful laughter” (Sypher 1956, 47). Meredith seems to privilege intellect over emotion by claiming that the physical release of laughter comes only after cognitive reflection. Writing just a few years later than Meredith, Henri Bergson removed emotions from the equation by stating that laughter is “like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple” (Sypher 1956, 64). Bergson goes even further by claiming that emotion is the “foe” of laughter (Sypher 1956, 63). These two theorists emphasize intellectual discernment over emotional responses in the reception of humor.

The emotional distance described by Bergson is similar to the relief theory of humor. Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the foundation of this theory, combines both psychology and aesthetics as a means to theorize about jokes (Freud [1905] 1960, 9), with a focus on explaining that we receive pleasure from jokes through either technique or purpose (Freud [1905] 1960, 117). Essentially, Freud compares jokes and dreams by asserting that they both have similarities, such as being involuntary and lacking logical patterns of reasoning (Freud [1905] 1960, 167). Further, the pleasure experienced from jokes occurs because the “compulsion of criticism” is inhibited (Freud [1905] 1960, 127). Essentially, humor provides pleasure because it is illogical and suppresses critical thought: “Reason, critical judgement, suppression – these are the forces against which it [a joke] fights in succession” (Freud [1905] 1960, 137). Freud’s theorization echoes that of Plato, who considered amusement an emotion to be avoided because it encouraged irrationality (Plato [1955] 1974, 606c).

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7 I disagree with Freud’s contention that humor is illogical and that reasoning skills are suppressed in order to enjoy it, a position I develop throughout this study.
Freud’s focus is on the psychic expenditure of emotions (e.g. anxiety) through the production and reception of jokes, an indication of his reliance on the release of human emotions as a means to explain the process of humor. Robert Sharpe provides seven reasons to support the view that amusement is an emotion: it has an object; it has a range; it may be suppressed; we can deceive ourselves about it; it is pleasant – like some emotions; cause and object are distinct; and, we can develop a “taste” for humor (in Morreall 1987, 208-210). Sharpe’s claims, combined with Freud’s assertion that humor releases emotions, seem to suggest that responses to humor are wholly emotive. However, topical humor also necessarily involves intellect because it requires awareness of current, and in some cases past, events, in addition to relying on audience’s abilities a think analogically and to complete enthymemes.

Roger Scruton seemingly provides a counter-argument to Sharpe by contending that “amusement is a mode of thought” (in Morreall 1987, 166), but these contrary views may actually coincide. Since incongruity and relief theories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, a conception of humor that involves both emotion and intellect must be articulated in which neither is privileged and both affective and cognitive elements are at work. There seems to be a gap, then, between those who assert that individual intellect is required to discern humor and those who argue that humor provides pleasure because it releases emotions and suppresses cognitive functions. Intellect and emotion need not be antithetical, especially with respect to a theory of humor that relates to tragedy. The integration of emotion and intellect becomes important when examining how humor was produced after 9/11.

The trauma following the attacks of September 11 elicited strong emotions in people, creating a situation in which people could not escape (or find distance) from negative feelings, but who also likely wanted a diversion from the horror just experienced in the United States.
Finding the right way to provide a release (emotional) or positive attitude catalyst (intellectual) was the challenge for humorists in the first four months after September 11. A stress on cognitive function in the production of humor relating to 9/11 might offend and alienate any audience that placed a higher value on emotions during such a sensitive time. Topical humorists paid careful attention to striking a balance between intellectual and emotional processes in their production of humor during this time period.

A similar equilibrium can also be achieved through a combination of the seemingly disparate theories relating to the function of humor in society. In examining the role of incongruity as a necessary element in all types of jokes, Daniel Perlmutter articulates that a delicate balance is required when appealing to intellect in humor: “some logical thinking is absolutely essential in order that the incongruity become apparent” and that there must be a “suspension of ordinary beliefs” by the receivers of comedy (Perlmutter 2002, 155-56). Perlmutter claims that even though logic must be suspended to allow for “the pleasure of the humor release” to occur, after this process is complete intellect is required in order to “translate” a joke into criticism, usually stemming from sources external to the joke itself (Perlmutter 2002, 159-61).

Perlmutter’s view not only allows for humor to be both emotive and cognitive, but also suggests that there can be varying degrees with respect to how different people experience humor. Some may feel only the physical release of laughter without any further reflection, while others may not laugh but rather focus on how a particular joke functions as a critique. Alternatively, a person may laugh during the presentation of a joke and then think about it critically afterward. Like almost all discursive events, topical humor is open to polyvalent and polysemous interpretation. However, in the four months after September 11, the production of
topical humor had to carefully negotiate shared negative emotions, such as anger, that existed in response to the attacks, in addition to facilitating both a cognitive and emotional transcendence of the tragedy.

How emotion and intellect were invoked in the primary texts examined in this chapter illustrates the precarious balance that topical humorists had to maintain in order to avoid alienating or further angering their audiences. Freud argued that the process of joking “aims at deriving pleasure from mental processes, whether intellectual or otherwise” (Freud [1905] 1960, 96). While the “otherwise” inserted here may appear maddeningly ambiguous, it does suggest that emotions can overshadow intellect or perhaps function as mental processes in and of themselves, an underlying theory in much of Freud’s work. Moreover, Freud writes, “[t]he species of humor are extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour; pity, anger, tenderness, and so on” (Freud [1905] 1960, 231-32). Humor necessarily involves some kind of emotion, whether it is released or repressed through joking.

The tragedy of 9/11 brought forth many negative emotions, the most common affective state being anger. Both identifying and releasing anger through humor related to a national tragedy is no easy task, and thus the topical humorists had to force what Burke refers to as “perspective by incongruity,” or in Morreall’s vocabulary, a “cognitive shift,” or in Freud’s term a “psychic release.” No change in attitude could take place without a commingling of both intellect and emotion. Humor changes the way we think and feel about an event, even a tragic one. How this occurs is a complex process involving both emotion and intellect and may stem from a single joke, a work of satire, a late night monologue or through exposure to a combination of topical humor discourses. I now turn to the initial forays into the production of topical humor
after September 11 to illustrate how emotion and intellect were used to force a change from anger over the attacks to acceptance of the tragic events.

**Reflections on the Role of Humor Post-9/11**

The *Washington Post* reported that the first jokes relating to the tragedy appeared on the Internet a mere five days, two hours, eight minutes and one second after the attacks (Klein 2002). Interestingly, these “jokes” were anagrams; word play with the letters of Osama bin Laden’s name to spell out things like “I’m no bean salad” (Klein 2002). This anagram does not contain any overtly political content – and I would argue that it is not funny – but this example illustrates how quickly jokes emerged after the attacks. David Letterman, Jay Leno, Jon Stewart and *The Onion*\(^8\) took a break from regular production after the attacks, but they were all back on television or in print on September 17, 18, 20 and 27, respectively.

The specific type of humor examined in this study is topical humor, a discourse that engages in a regular mocking of current events taking place in politics or entertainment. In the four months after September 11, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, Jay Leno, *The Onion* and “Saturday Night Live” all referenced the attacks, and audiences would have expected this given the nature of topical humor. But each producer differed in how the events of September 11 were addressed – some examining the history leading up to the attacks and others mocking potential future actions in response to 9/11. While the form of topical humor can change according to different genres (e.g. late night monologue or satirical newspaper) and the ethos of the producer(s), the source of invention remains constant.

In addition to sharing a common resource for humor production, each of the topical humorists examined in this study demonstrated an extreme sensitivity to the emotional climate of

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\(^8\) “Saturday Night Live” was on summer break and returned on its scheduled season premiere, September 29, 2001.
the nation after the attacks of September 11. While anger eventually emerged as a commonly
shared emotion among Americans, fear and sadness were also common responses in the initial
aftermath and confusion of the attacks. Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, “Saturday
Night Live,” and The Onion could not immediately make jokes about the terrorist attacks without
first addressing the fragile emotional state of their audiences. These topical humorists explicitly
acknowledged the sadness and fear that existed in the country, as well as critically reflected upon
the role of humor in society post-9/11.

Openly recognizing the altered emotional state of the United States was necessary before
audiences could tolerate attempts at topical humor. An early attempt at humor came from Gilbert
Gottfried at the Friars’ Club Roast for Hugh Hefner that took place in New York two weeks after
September 11. His opening statement was a joke that he could not get a direct flight from
California because “they said they would have to stop at the Empire State Building First,” a
statement that was met with boos and a shout of “too soon” from an audience member (Rich
2005). Gottfried ceased any additional attempts at topical humor. One of the functions of topical
humor is to bring about a critical insight into current events, an argument that I develop more
fully in subsequent chapters, a function suggested by Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” and
Morreall’s “cognitive shift.” But before topical humor could provide such a critical perspective,
emotions had to be acknowledged, addressed and released. This is where topical humor
produced immediately after a tragedy differs from other examples of humor. Producers cannot
assume that audiences are ready for critical insights stemming from topical humor after a tragic
event like September 11. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of topical humorists’ first
discourses after the attacks were not funny, but rather public demonstrations of emotional release
and reflections on the function of humor in a democracy. An overview of how Letterman, Leno,
Stewart and “Saturday Night Live” addressed their audiences after taking at least a week off post-9/11 will illuminate how these shows proceeded cautiously with the production of topical humor, and in some cases, took great pains to avoid being funny in these inaugural shows.

David Letterman returned to television on September 17, and his show featured Dan Rather reciting “America the Beautiful” while tears fell from his eyes (Klein 2002). Jay Leno broadcast the first “Tonight Show” after the attacks on September 18, 2001 and Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show” re-appeared on September 20, 2001. All three of these late night hosts broadcast their first shows post-September 11 within days of each other, and each host made self-reflexive comments about the function of comic guardians in society during this tragic time. A comparison of these first shows is instructive concerning how emotions were privileged immediately after September 11 in order to allow for the eventual return of topical humor as a critically reflective discourse.

David Letterman, whose show is taped before a live audience in New York City, said that he was on the air because of the example of Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who told the country to get back to work. Beyond this call to duty, Letterman also provided an explanation for the attacks:

> The reason we were attacked, the reason these people are missing and dead, they weren’t doing anything wrong. They were living their lives, they were going to work, they were traveling, they were doing what they normally do. As I understand it – and my understanding of this is vague at best – another group of people stole some airplanes and crashed them into buildings. We are told that they were zealots fueled by religious fervor. And if you live to be 1,000 years old, will that make any sense to you? Will that make any goddamn sense? ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 9/18/01).

This “explanation” is an admission of being unable to understand the recent tragedy. Further, the public sharing of feelings (coming from a rather private public figure) coupled with an
immediate acknowledgement of being “very sad,” and showing Dan Rather tearing up twice, mirrored the nation’s highly emotional status.

A tension emerges through an incongruity introduced here: Mayor Giuliani calls for people to get back to work, return to normal, but Letterman points out that it was people “doing what they normally do” that put them in harm’s way on September 11. This observation was not made to incite laughter, but rather it acknowledges the fear and helplessness felt by most audience members. The emotional tone struck by Letterman was appropriate for his immediate audience in New York and those watching from home. People were comforted by Letterman’s open admission of sadness and confusion, which was widely considered an appropriate response to the tragedy. More importantly, a display of sadness and grief was required before Letterman could return to his job: making jokes about current events.

Jay Leno told his audience on September 18 that he was back to work at the directive of Mayor Giuliani and President Bush. Leno also sent prayers to “the victims, the victims’ families, and the incredibly brave men and women of the New York Police and Fire Departments” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/19/01). While he openly noted that his profession seemed “incredibly irrelevant” in this time of national crisis, Leno felt his show was “a cookie to those firemen” and that telling jokes was the equivalent of donating blood or making sandwiches ("The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01). For those who may disagree with his assessment, Leno stated: “[s]o, in the days and nights when you see us out here being silly and telling jokes, some people will understand it and some won’t. And those that don’t, well, ‘Nightline’s’ a great show too” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01). In addition to Leno justifying his job, his guest, Senator John McCain, also provided a strong sanction for the show: “I talked to the President today, and I told him I was going on the show, and he thought it was good and he thinks our nation needs some
humor. And I think you can provide it, to tell you the truth” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01).

Both Jay Leno and David Letterman cited the President of the United States and the Mayor of New York City as authorities sanctioning their return to work on national television, and Jay Leno received direct permission from the President via his guest, Senator McCain. While David Letterman struck the pose of an everyman confused and saddened by the tragic events that took place in the city in which he works, Jay Leno offered a “cookie” that could serve as a means to refresh, like blood or food, and made an analogy about the attacks. He compared the passengers who fought off the terrorists on United Airlines flight 93 to those who served in World War II (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01). What Leno and Letterman have in common is an acute sense of self-reflexivity about what they do for a living (topical humor) and what their work product means to a nation grieving after 9/11.

“The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” like David Letterman, is filmed in New York, but this show made its first appearance after the attacks on September 20. There were no guests or the usual mock news stories that appear on the show; instead, Stewart began with a question for his audience, “Are you OK?” (The Jon Stewart Resource 2001). Similar to Letterman and Leno, Stewart was following orders: “They said get back to work. There were no jobs available for a man in the fetal position under his desk crying, which I would have gladly taken. So I came back here” (The Jon Stewart Resource 2001). The tone was similar to Letterman’s except that instead of having his guest cry, it was Stewart who choked up when he stated that he grieved but did not despair. He also stated he thought of his job as a “privilege”:

Just even the idea that we can sit in the back of the country and make wise cracks . . . This is a country that allows for open satire, and I know that sounds basic and it sounds as though it goes
without saying – but that’s really what this whole situation is about. It’s the difference between closed and open. It’s the difference between free and burden and we don’t take that for granted here by any stretch of the imagination and our show has changed. I don’t doubt that. What it’s become, I don’t know. ‘Subliminable’ is not a punch line anymore. One day it will become that again, and Lord willing, it will become that again because that means we have ridden out the storm (The Jon Stewart Resource 2001).

This passage frames the return of “The Daily Show” as an indicator of normalcy. However, this initial show was not “normal” because not all topics were open to humor and mockery. First, the storm of negative emotions had to be addressed and ridden out. Only after this transition was complete could topical humor begin to nudge the nation toward a new kind of normalcy in which it was appropriate to mock everyone from average citizens to the President of the United States.

Stewart told his audience that the view from his apartment was once the Twin Towers, but now he has a clear view of the Statue of Liberty, and he promised that “it’s going to be the same as it was” (The Jon Stewart Resource 2001). The show is filled with clips from previous shows, but Stewart returns at the end to sign off holding a puppy, waving its paw at the camera in a gesture of comfort. Using parts of old shows that had already been broadcast illustrates Stewart’s caution about returning to the production of topical humor immediately after the attacks. This first show helps to explain the function of humor, as well as openly recognizes the negative emotions felt by the audience. Stewart notes that the country and his show will eventually return to normal – “the same as it was” – but not immediately. These comments convey Stewart’s hope that the nation will return to normal, an attitude consistent with the comic frame.

Like Leno, Stewart reflects on what his job means to society during a national tragedy. The shows were brought back because people were encouraged to get back to work, and Stewart
specifically noted: “We found some clips that we thought might make you smile, which is really what’s necessary” (The Jon Stewart Resource 2001). Stewart’s emotional display was similar to Dan Rather’s tearful recitation of patriotic lyrics, and all three late night talk show hosts publicly contemplated their roles as topical humorists by acknowledging and exhibiting emotion to help a grieving nation heal. This contemplation on the function of humor was important during a tragic time full of fear and anxiety, and it is especially noteworthy that these shows were self-reflexive during their initial broadcasts after September 11.

Indeed, media outlets ranging from Comedy Central to CNN reported on the death of irony (Kurtzman 2002). And yet, topical humor did return to the airwaves, albeit in a highly self-conscious manner. Another example of self-reflexivity was demonstrated by “Saturday Night Live,” which began its 27th season on September 29, 2001. The show featured Mayor Rudolph Giuliani on stage, surrounded by New York fire and police personnel, after Paul Simon performed his mournful song about New York loneliness, “The Boxer” (Doniger 2001). The creator of the show, Lorne Michaels, explicitly sought permission to begin the show by asking the mayor if it was OK to be funny again. Mayor Giuliani fired off the first joke by replying, “Why start now?” (Doniger 2001).

This first episode of “Saturday Night Live” caused speculation in advance concerning whether or not Will Ferrell would impersonate President Bush in the season’s opening episode. In response to this query, Ferrell stated: “I think in some ways we’ve seen Bush transform into a real leader. There’s also a collective spirit at ‘Saturday Night Live’ that this is not the time to make fun of anything political or topical. We’re very sensitive to that and we’re going to play it by ear” (Wolf 2001). This conscious effort to avoid political topics from a show that had been parodying Presidential debates and Presidents for over twenty years is notable and speaks to the
fact that 9/11 prevented humor from addressing topics that could be interpreted as betraying a sense of national unity and/or strong leadership. After this initial episode aired, another “Saturday Night Live” actor, Darrell Hammond, appeared on “Hannity and Colmes” and reflected on the show: “It was really hard. If you begin to consider that we are a show that is probably really well known for doing political parodies or parodying our leaders and it’s a climate in which leaders and the military are completely off limits” (CNN 2001). Hammond also noted that there was “not a chance” of making fun of the president (CNN 2001). This was true until the next week when Will Ferrell did impersonate President Bush.

I will soon turn to examples of humor featured on subsequent shows, but the open reflection on the business of comedy illustrated on these first shows is crucial to understanding the production and reception of topical humor after 9/11. Permission to make jokes and laugh again was explicitly sought from President Bush and Mayor Giuliani, and consent was provided either through calls to get back to work, a third party speaking with the President, or the actual appearance of Mayor Giuliani in front of a live New York audience, who granted permission by making a joke himself. Citing the authorities that allowed these late night shows to go back on the air again functioned for audiences in two ways. First, invoking authority figures meant it was appropriate for people to watch comedy programs in an attempt to gain comfort through humor, even though humor was not necessarily an integral part of these inaugural shows. Second, mentioning President Bush and Mayor Giuliani, coupled with acts of self-reflection on the function of humorists in society, sought legitimacy from the audience itself for the existence of humor during a time of tragedy. Seeking permission and establishing legitimacy for topical humor during this time was incredibly important, and not every topical humorist properly negotiated the high emotions after 9/11
Bill Maher’s show, “Politically Incorrect” was back on the air on September 17, 2001, the same day as David Letterman. Maher, however, seemed to miscalculate what his viewing public was ready to accept a mere six days after airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center by commenting: "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly" (Brownfield 2002). Some ABC affiliates stopped carrying the show when advertisers such as FedEx and Sears Roebuck pulled their ads due to Maher’s comment (Brownfield 2002). The show was eventually cancelled on June 16, 2002, and rather ironically, six days after the cancellation the Los Angeles Press Club awarded Maher the President’s Award for free speech (Hogg 2005).

Taking a closer look at the brouhaha surrounding Maher’s comments is warranted here to illustrate why this combination of citing leaders’ authority and seeking permission from the audience was vital during the most successful first shows. During his first week back, Maher left an empty chair on the panel in memory of a frequent guest and his friend, Barbara Olson, a conservative pundit who died on the plane that flew into the Pentagon while en route to appear on his show ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/18/01). This no doubt caused him some guilt, and when his guest Dinesh D’Souza said that he disagreed with President Bush that the terrorists were cowards, Maher made the fateful comment that “we have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/18/01). The backlash was immediate, as FedEx pulled its advertising from the show the next day ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/19/01).

Bill Maher was interviewed by the National Journal on September 19, 2001, and stressed his pronoun choice of “we” in his statement:
I have been probably the staunchest defender of the military of anyone who has been on the show. The ‘we’ refers to the policy makers and the civilian society that they were afraid would turn on them if military lives were lost . . . . There was a clear and present danger even before the events of last week. Our government for years and years knew about it and did not have the guts to really deal with the situation” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01).

But the damage was already done as the sound-bite picked up by the mainstream media outlets was Maher’s comment on “Politically Incorrect” and not his interview with the National Journal. Maher did issue an apology for the “insensitive” comment on September 25, 2001, but it was too little, too late for many Americans (Rosenberg 2001). Maher has been forever linked to what many considered an inappropriate criticism of the U.S. military.

From the distance of a few years, this comment may not seem noteworthy. But it provides a perspective by incongruity that is perhaps disturbing not so much in pointing to differences, but in hinting at similarities between the terrorists and the U.S. government. Both send a few people to die in order to “protect” the larger population or an ideology, however flawed or misdirected. Of course, the United States Military is not a terrorist group that actively and intentionally seeks to injure and kill civilians of other countries, but Maher failed to qualify his remarks in this manner. It was the matter of fact style in which he made this statement that perhaps unsettled those unfamiliar with Maher and who heard only this one comment taken out of context.

More pointedly, Maher’s comment was made within the context of a show devoted to topical humor. Devoid of any self-reflection on the role of humor in society, or the citation of authorities sanctioning the return of humor post-9/11, Maher was vulnerable to criticism and outrage about his callous comments. While no one can say for certain whether Maher’s commentary would have been made more palatable if he had followed in the footsteps of the
more cautious late night talk shows noted above, it seems safe to say that the observation about cowardly actions had no place in the first show after the terrorist attacks. This point will become clear as I examine humor produced in subsequent shows produced by Leno, Letterman, Stewart and “Saturday Night Live.”

Audiences, advertisers and media pundits were not the only groups to react to Maher’s commentary. When asked to respond to Maher’s observation, White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer noted on September 26, 2001:

> I'm aware of the press reports about what he said. I have not seen the actual transcript of the show itself. But assuming the press reports are right, it's a terrible thing to say, and it's unfortunate. And that's why -- there was an earlier question about has the President said anything to people in his own party -- they're reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that; there never is (Fleischer 2001).

Fleischer did not have to consult the transcript of the entire show before coming to the conclusion that Maher’s comments were inappropriate and ill-timed, and other receivers of the remark would likely not feel compelled to further contextualize the oft-repeated single line quote, either. The name of Maher’s show was “Politically Incorrect”; however, it appeared that the nation was not ready for the particular type of incorrectness expressed on September 17, instead favoring the more careful choice of words demonstrated by Leno, Letterman and Stewart or, alternatively, silence. Fleischer’s comment about people’s need to “watch what they say, watch what they do” was later used as an example of the Bush administration’s dangerous curtailing of civil liberties like free speech, but at the time, Maher’s position on who was cowardly or not came off as inappropriate and provoked strong objections from a variety of groups.
The differences between Maher’s first show and those done by Letterman, Leno, Stewart and “Saturday Night Live” are instructive. Even though there was an empty chair in memory of a 9/11 victim on the set of “Politically Incorrect,” people tuning into the show late may have overlooked this gesture, and the action was not mentioned in the majority of the media critiques surrounding this episode. Maher and his guests charged into a discussion of the attacks that was devoid of any sentimentality and lacked an emotional release similar to that provided by Letterman and Stewart. Further, there was no invoking of the President or Mayor Giuliani as permission to be back at work and little or no critical reflection on the function of a show such as “Politically Correct” after September 11.

Maher likely assumed his audience knew what to expect from him and that open debate about issues was perhaps more vital after 9/11 than before the terrorist attacks. But a majority of Americans clearly did not understand any efficacy in language that seemingly denigrated the United States government or the military and, by extension, the public. Maher needed to better articulate what the purpose of his show was in the aftermath of a national trauma as a preemptive guard against those opposed to critical discourse and/or humor in response to a tragedy. Instead, Maher refused to change his style or the show’s format to meet the needs of a nation suffering from sadness, grief and fear: “I’m just going to do what I’ve always done on the show, which is to keep it real. If that’s too much right now, it wouldn’t surprise me” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/19/01). It apparently was too much, given the demise of the show. The extreme emotions evoked by 9/11 were still painfully present in mid-September 2001 and Maher failed to satisfactorily acknowledge and allay these feelings, illustrating an error in producing humor that privileged intellect over emotion during this time.
There is another example of a first attempt at humor after the attacks that warrants close examination because of its successful melding of both emotions and intellect: the September 27, 2001 edition of The Onion, a satiric newspaper. The Onion, available both on-line and in print, used a bold headline hovering above a map of the U.S. engulfed in flames and centered by crosshairs. It read, “Holy Fucking Shit – Attack on America” (The Onion 2001, 37:34), which seemed to sum up the wholesale surprise and speechlessness of the majority of Americans. This headline evoked a communal identity among readers who lacked an ability to articulate their reactions to September 11. Kenneth Burke’s comic frame has been used to describe how identification can be used to unite people suffering from a tragic occurrence, a unity required in order to foster the possibility of positive changes (Carlson 1988, 318-19).

Further, the use of obscenity both appalls and attracts an audience, helping to establish the work as one of humor (Bloom 1979, 57; 216). A traditional newspaper would never use expletives in a headline or within an article, making this headline incongruous with generic expectations. In addition to serving as an introduction to The Onion’s post-September 11 brand of comedy, the use of expletives functions as a demand that the world “make sense” (Toker 2002, 16), an urge shared by most people post-September 11. In this case, the use of obscenity articulated shared anger over the terrorist attacks, and rage often underlies public expressions of profanity. Further, the use of expletives may indicate that there is a lack of acceptable words that can explain or address the topic, leaving individuals with obscenities as the means to express their frustration. The first edition of The Onion articulates this shared anger over 9/11 and thus marks the first phase of humor relating to a tragedy. Only after negative emotions such as grief, fear and rage were recognized and expelled could the nation begin to accept and adapt to a changed world that includes the reality of planes flying into buildings.
*The Onion* also conveyed the helplessness of individual efforts in an article entitled, “Not Knowing What Else to Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake.” In the article, Christine Pearson from Topeka, Kansas created the red, white and blue pastry after she “already donated blood, mailed a check to the Red Cross, and sent a letter of thanks to the New York Fire Department” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:34). This article depicts the banality of everyday life in the wake of such devastation, a common feeling experienced by many in response to the attacks. The gesture of baking a cake would have seemed devoid of any substantive meaning before September 11, but the fact that Ms. Pearson “had never visited and knows no one in either New York or Washington” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:34) conveys the fact that citizens surviving at a distance from the attacks share a common bond; they all seek to do something, no matter how mundane.

This story about a woman baking a cake articulates the lack of significant opportunities that individuals had to aid and comfort fellow citizens in the immediate aftermath of September 11. This simultaneously should remind readers of their status as a community. The identification of a common bond – not knowing what to do as Americans as well as readers of *The Onion* – articulates this unified identity. While the established readership of *The Onion* (predominantly 18-35 year old males, the majority of whom have attended college) would likely not need such an identity function in previous issues of the satirical newspaper, the tragic events of September 11 required efforts to re-unify shocked individuals into a community.

Notably, the average readership for this issue increased from 158,000 to 400,000 people on the first day that it was posted on-line (Wolk 2001, 12), suggesting that *The Onion*’s humor filled a need within a much broader audience than it typically reached. Other headlines such as “Hugging Up 76,000 Percent” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:34) highlight other some connections among
American readers. *The Onion* deliberately fostered and reflected the identification among potential actors within their reading community through these stories and headlines that, ironically, feature a sense of helplessness. But this vulnerability was not experienced alone; *The Onion* made it clear that everyone felt defenseless and thus called attention to the nation’s unity. These stories serve a therapeutic function by illustrating a common bond of emotional suffering among U.S. citizens, helping to establish *The Onion* as empathetic and conscious of the fear, grief and sadness experienced across the country. More importantly, the headlines and stories also articulated anger over the attacks, a necessary first step for topical humor during this phase.

In addition to identifying and encouraging a common identity for its readership through an articulation of shared emotions and as an effort to move beyond the tragedy, *The Onion* also provides a cognitively based perspective by incongruity in order for individuals to properly identify the traumatic situation. By juxtaposing aspects of the attacks that are seemingly absurd (e.g. baking cakes as a response to terrorism), *The Onion* forces its audience to re-align such incongruities, allowing for what Burke terms “maximum consciousness” (Burke [1937] 1984, 171). Further, the common identity evoked through a reliance on shared emotions helps to transcend the negative attitudes felt in response to the tragic event. This issue of *The Onion* also contained articles that provided information about the history leading up to the attacks, while also predicting potential responses to 9/11.

*The Onion* addressed the problem of how to eradicate future terrorists in an article titled, “U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever It Is We’re at War With” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:34). The story contains within it a map of the world and a legend depicting “Possible locations of terrorists” with stripes and “Confirmed location of terrorists” in solids. The world is covered in stripes. This graphic illustration that the world is the target for United States’ retaliation forces an
acknowledgment of the absurdity of a military strategy that would seek to root out terrorists not aligned with a nation-state.

Another article attempted to more accurately report on events leading up to the attacks. The article, “Bush Sr. Apologizes to Son for Funding Bin Laden in 80’s” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:34), smuggles in an indictment of the United States government for its prior involvement in Afghanistan. By way of explanation, “Bush Sr.” tells his son: “I’m sorry, son . . . We thought it was a good idea at the time because he [bin Laden] was part of a group fighting communism in Central Asia. We called them freedom fighters back then. I know it sounds weird. You sort of had to be there” (*The Onion* 2001, 27:34). This “apology” goes beyond a mimicked conversation between father and son. The confession dispels the false memory that the United States had no prior involvement with bin Laden and thus forces an acknowledgment of past actions. This article helps to bring about a more accurate memory of historical events.

Although this story can be read as assigning some responsibility for the attacks on the United States, it did not receive the condemnation and outrage that Maher’s comment did. I suggest this is due to the surrounding articles and headlines acknowledging the shared emotions regarding the attacks. *The Onion* addressed its readers both cognitively and emotionally, a balance that Maher did not achieve because his comments focused on the (current) military instead of (past) President Bush. Additionally, the medium of written satire, especially that of a newspaper parody, could engage in critical commentary sooner than a television host because of differences in transmission: the comments Maher made were connected with a real person’s ethos, while *The Onion* is written by a group of individuals who are known only through their work product. The anonymity of *The Onion* allowed for it to produce topical humor that directly
questioned the involvement of the United States in foreign relations before the attacks of 9/11, whereas Maher’s comment was about current military actions.

The Onion also directly wrestled with the connection between tragedy and comedy. Hugh Duncan defines tragedy as always including a reference to gods or devils and conveying a vice that separates humans from gods, while comedy addresses the errors that separate individuals from each other and does not necessarily involve divine figures (Duncan 1968, 60). The Onion complicates Duncan’s – and perhaps our own – neat constructs of the tragic and comic in another Onion article, “God Angrily Clarifies ‘Don’t Kill’ Rule” (The Onion 2001, 37:34). In this article, the 9/11 hijackers angered God enough for Him to appear on earth – New York – and state His commandment “in person.”

God is quoted speaking to the crowd gathered around Him: “‘I’m talking to all of you, here!’ continued God, His voice rising to a shout. ‘Do you hear Me? I don’t want you to kill anybody, I’m against it, across the board. How many times do I have to say it? Don’t kill each other anymore – ever! I’m fucking serious!’” (The Onion 2001, 37:34). God’s angry presence should close the tragic gap that occurred between Himself and His subjects stemming from the actions of the human hijackers. However, the article ends with this: “Upon completing His outburst, God fell silent, standing quietly at the podium for several moments. Then, witnesses reported, God’s shoulders began to shake, and He wept” (The Onion 2001, 37:34).

Here is an example of comedy and tragedy operating simultaneously, playing off each other to provide an emotional outlet. God crying for humans over the devastation meted out in His name maintains the tragic separation of God and His subjects. However, God coming to earth to admonish those who take His name as grounds for killing is rather comic in that He uses profanity and becomes clearly agitated – or humanlike - that His simple command goes
unheeded. God’s anger here mirrors the anger felt by humans at the senseless tragedy that occurred on 9/11. *The Onion* uses God to illustrate the unifying emotion of anger, which marks the initial phase of humor relating to a tragedy, as articulated by Morrow. Additionally, that God came down to earth to express his rage conveys the possibility that the evil that took place on 9/11 can be corrected, further falling in line with Burke’s contention that the comic frame can bring about “maximum consciousness” in order for a community to take corrective action.

For Burke, the comic frame allows individuals to observe themselves in action, which allows for a maximum consciousness capable of transcending a crisis (Burke [1937] 1984, 171). This maximum consciousness is the aim of comic guardians, people who identify ironic or incongruous gaps in society to inform society about what is lacking as a means to inspire individuals to fill in those fissures (Duncan 1968, 98). Because of this, the comic frame functions as a corrective to faulty perspectives, and maximum consciousness can then allow for actions to take place that re-align the situations comic guardians have identified as being incongruous. Clearly, both tragic and comic elements are at play within *The Onion*, in addition to both emotional and intellectual elements.

Late night television shows consciously reflected on the role of humor in society as a means to remind or inform audiences concerning the importance of topical humor in the United States. In addition to a few lachrymose demonstrations, these late night shows also referenced national leaders (or had them appear) as reasons to go back to work. *The Onion* did not engage in the same sort of reflection because of the difficulty in distinguishing between sarcasm and earnestness in the written words of a satirical newspaper. Rather, this publication adopted a comic frame that openly acknowledged the recent tragic events, but also sought to transcend the feelings of fear and sadness by highlighting the shared feeling of anger. These “firsts” are
important to examine because they set the tone for what could next emerge: topical humor relating to 9/11.

**Back to “Normal”?**

Audiences accepted humor in the first four months after September 11 that focused primarily on those perceived to be the enemies of America (e.g. Osama bin Laden and the Taliban). Historically, national enemies are safe topics of humor (Klein 2002), and this stems from the fact that international foes are prime targets for a country’s anger, especially after an attack within the nation’s borders. After taking the time to seek permission and briefly articulate the importance of humor to the United States in their initial shows, topical humorists began to aim their comic correctives at Osama bin Laden and other enemies of the United States, as well as to create a bridge between the pre- and post-9/11 nation.

In modern society the stand-up comedian has replaced the storyteller in the role of helping us to deal with our “struggle within a fragmented world” (Boskin 1997, 29). Looking back on the history of humor in the United States, this switch can best be illuminated by two popular topical humorists: Mark Twain and Lenny Bruce. Both men addressed topics such as racism within their particular temporal contexts, and because of this their discourses necessitated different styles. Twain was a storyteller whereas Bruce was a stand-up comedian. The change may be attributed to American audiences’ (assumed) shortened attention spans, but it is also due to the honing of American humor that has always relied upon brevity and wit. Stand-up humor and sketch comedy have replaced the humorous novel and short story in contemporary topical humor.9

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9 Of course, audience preference for a particular form of topical humor will change over time due to aesthetic tastes and/or modes of transmission. I note that Greek and Roman audiences preferred the performance of comedic plays
The monologues of Leno and Letterman are essentially truncated stand-up routines, and after September 11, these monologues helped to contextualize the tragedy by repeating familiar jokes from before the attacks, as well as mocking the enemies of the United States. Essentially, Leno and Letterman used their monologues to identify how the world changed and stayed the same by mocking the cultural differences between the United States and the terrorists. These comparisons privilege the superiority of the United States and reference a shared anger, but they also help soothe the nation’s emotional scars by reminding them of a safer past.

On September 18, 2001, his second night back, Letterman was still a bit tentative about the selection of jokes in his monologue. Interestingly, the Top Ten List was “things that almost rhyme with the word ‘hat,’” which Letterman explained were “interesting. They don’t need to be funny” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/18/01). Similarly, on Leno’s second show he stated: “We’re just being silly this week trying to make people feel good. People are chipping in. All of Hollywood is helping out. . . . rap stars are now offering to donate their arsenals to the United States Military” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/19/01). Leno offers a justification for being silly while Letterman is still hesitant, arguing that one of his recurring bits does not really need to be funny yet.

Both hosts, however, locate a “safe” target in President Bill Clinton because of his connection to a less tragic past, one involving sexual improprieties rather than of acts of terrorism. Additionally, that Clinton was no longer in a position of power also made him a prime candidate for this role because of the perception that national leaders were off limits for topical humorists due to the nation’s need for a strong leader, and such strength is undermined by jokes made at the expense of the President. Clinton jokes were safe because they reminded viewers of and sketches, preferences that changed with (the fall of these empires and) the increased availability/affordability of printed materials.
an object of humor that was popular before the attacks, thereby creating a bridge between a pre- and post-9/11 through the use of a repeated punch line.

As evidence that topical humor bridged events in the pre- and post-9/11 nation, Clinton is not the only humorous subject to appear before and after the attacks. The Center for Media and Public Affairs did quantitative analyses of the actual number of jokes that were made on “The Late Show with David Letterman,” “The Tonight Show” and “Late Night With Conan O’Brien” in 2000 and after September 11, 2001. The top ten joke targets in the year 2000 were George W. Bush (910), Bill Clinton (806), Al Gore (530), Hillary Clinton (186), Dick Cheney (155), Monica Lewinsky (100), Rudolph Giuliani (77), Janet Reno (76), O.J. Simpson (60), and John McCain (59) (The Center for Media and Public Affairs 2000). From September 11 to December 31, 2001, the breakdown changed in this manner: Osama bin Laden (207), Bill Clinton (80), Taliban Militia (65), Geraldo Rivera (33), John Walker Lindh (28), George W. Bush (25), Al Gore (25), Gary Condit (17), Dick Cheney (14), Michael Bloomberg (10) (The Center for Media and Public Affairs 2001). The time frame is certainly shorter in the latter survey, so it may seem that some topics are more important only because they were part of the news cycle during this period (e.g. Lindh, Rivera). But the decrease in frequency of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney jokes as compared to Bill Clinton and Al Gore is considerable, even accounting for the fact that Bush and Cheney were in positions of power in 2001. After all, Clinton and Gore jokes outnumbered Bush and Cheney jokes when they were still in power in 2000, indicating that the targets of humor changed because of 9/11.

By way of explanation, Jay Leno noted: “We can’t do Bush jokes anymore, he’s smart now” (Kurtzman 2002). This echoes Jon Stewart’s comment noted above that “subliminable” was no longer a punch line, as well as Will Ferrell’s unwillingness to impersonate the president
in the first episode of “Saturday Night Live.” Part of the reluctance to mock President Bush and Vice President Cheney stemmed from the belief that leaders should not be criticized during a time of war, and the events of 9/11 instigated the global war on terror. Topics such as a sex scandal or someone lacking in animation while speaking reminded audiences of simpler times, a time when terrorist activities were not the main topic of concern within the country. David Letterman consciously noted this on October 2, 2001: “You know what the country needs right now, a good old-fashioned Bill Clinton sex-scandal” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 10/02/01).

In addition to Gore and Clinton jokes, David Letterman also included a series of comments about New York squirrels living in Central Park in the wake of the attacks: they painted their nuts red, white and blue ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 09/19/01), x-rayed their nuts (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/09/01), sprayed their nuts with Lysol (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/19/01), rubbed Cipro on their nuts to prevent anthrax (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 11/2/01), and moisturized their nuts during a New York drought (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 11/27/01). This list of activities depicts, in an anthropomorphic manner, chronological activities that the average New Yorker would have done or been exposed to: outward expressions of patriotism, extreme security measures, panic about anthrax, and living through a drought. With the exception of the last example, most Americans could identify with the squirrels’ cum average citizens’ actions during the last months of 2001 because they referenced new stories and practices that affected the whole nation.

During this same time period, Jay Leno made frequent comparisons between U.S. and Middle Eastern culture. On September 23, Leno reported that Osama bin Laden had increased his wealth through “construction, smart investments and gas and oil investments” in order to wage war on capitalism (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/24/01), bringing up an obvious tension
between bin Laden’s actions and words. On October 18, 2001, Leno told his audience that children were hoarding the meals dropped from U.S. planes and selling them for profits in the city and then queried, “Who says the American way of life couldn’t catch on here?” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/19/01). Leno also noted similarities between Clinton and bin Laden. On September 25, 2001 Leno observed that these two men never sleep in the same place twice and on October 10, he suggested that Clinton be put in charge of finding bin Laden because it was recently reported that bin Laden had an affair with a married woman (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/26/01; 10/11/01). Bin Laden was also compared to Batman by Leno because both live in caves (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/11/01).

Leno invoked comparisons between U.S. sports teams and the Taliban. For example, on October 9, 2001, he noted that neither the Redskins nor the Taliban would be around for the playoffs (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/10/01). He also commented that bin Laden’s height might make him a good candidate for the NBA draft (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 10/19/01). And when the media reported that bin Laden wanted his sons to shoot him if he was to be captured, Leno called the offspring Erik and Lyle bin Laden in reference to the notorious Menendez brothers who killed their parents in Beverly Hills, California in 1989 (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 12/10/01). These cultural comparisons create analogies that help audiences understand foreign threats by framing them in familiar terms. The use of sports is a straightforward way to make such connections, as most U.S. audiences recognize references to football or basketball. Audiences would make the connection that Clinton slept in different places every night because of his reputation for sexual promiscuity, while bin Laden must do so because he is being sought by the United States military. This joke reassures the audience that
bin Laden is on the run because he is being hunted, while it simultaneously mocks Clinton’s past behavior.

The references to capitalism refer to a commonly cited reason for the attacks: al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden hate the way of life in the United States, an existence that privileges accumulating wealth over spiritual enlightenment. Leno notes that bin Laden and the children of Afghanistan engage in capitalistic endeavors when it suits their needs, thus dismissing Islamic extremists’ critiques as being hypocritical. These jokes can also be understood as advancing the cause of American superiority: they say they hate our way of life yet mimic our economy when they have the chance, proving the pre-eminence of the U.S. lifestyle. Depending on the level of reflection afforded to these jokes, they can be enjoyed for making bin Laden look ridiculous or for presenting the U.S. as superior because of its market economy. Both of these interpretations, bin Laden as a fool or the supremacy of the U.S. market, tap into the nation’s anger over the attacks.

Letterman also makes cultural analogies, but the bulk of his monologues stay focused on what took place in New York during this time. Late night television monologues routinely reference current events, and both Leno and Letterman detail the minutiae of life in a post 9/11 world. The use of Clinton jokes helps create a bridge from pre-9/11 to post-9/11 by offering a respite from current concerns and providing a familiar reference when dealing with unfamiliar threats like Osama bin Laden or understanding Middle Eastern cultures. These monologues reflect prevalent emotions and actions taking place in the U.S., from outward displays of patriotism to coping with new threats like anthrax. Leno and Letterman framed a frightening war on terror with familiar jokes and analogies that helped audiences to cope with the tragedy of 9/11. They were successful in balancing solemnity for the attacks with performing their jobs as
topical humorists, especially when compared to Bill Maher, and they were able to do so because of their continued critical consciousness about the function of topical humor during tragic times.

When both Leno and Letterman went on a break from October 22 through October 26, there was a great deal of concern over what re-runs should appear during this week. Rick Ludwin, senior Vice President of NBC’s late night programming stated: “We are being very careful about the repeats we select now. For this current week, we did choose shows post-September 11 because they are considered more timely and responsible” (Huff 2001). All shows that included “jabs at the President, [or] terrorists” were considered “tasteless” and to be avoided at all costs (Huff 2001). This cautious selection of re-runs also extended to at least one situation comedy, “Seinfeld.” The show’s syndicator, Tristar, pulled an episode that was to be re-shown on November 22, 2001 wherein a character dies from licking toxic glue on the envelopes for her wedding invitations. Tristar spokeswoman Andi Sporkin stated: “We’ve been trying to be sensitive to all of the content in our programs in light of the recent events” (Kaplan 2001). Apparently, this scenario in “Seinfeld” was too close to anthrax related threats taking place in the country at this time, illustrating that humor – both current and that shown in re-runs – was under close scrutiny post-September 11.

Coverage of the attacks in the media itself became a topic for humor on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” which introduced a recurring feature titled “Operation Enduring Coverage” to lampoon how 9/11 was being reported on by news programs (Kurtzman 2002). The show instituted a running scroll at the bottom of the screen during the anthrax scares of October 2001, similar to those used by CNN and other news channels in the wake of the attacks. These headlines reported such things as, “White Powder Found on Donut in St. Louis” and “91 Percent
of Americans ‘Want Mommy’” (Kurtzman 2002). “The Daily Show” called its own coverage of the attacks “America Freaks Out” (Kurtzman 2002), surely an accurate description of life immediately after 9/11.

The “America Freaks Out” segments brought a critical focus to the practice of topical humor, as this was the form in which these observations were expressed, but the recurring feature also critiqued how the tragedy was covered in the mainstream media. The format of “The Daily Show” is a parody of nightly newscasts, similar to how The Onion parodies newspapers. In this manner, both discourses function as a critique on two levels: one is the open mocking of items in the news, similar to Letterman and Leno; and the second critique is of the production of news itself. The comic frame constructed by “The Daily Show” is applied to not only individual items of news, but also the media in general. In this manner, anger over the attacks is also directed at the producers of news for the manner in which they prey on the nation’s fear and anxiety, emotions topical humorists attempt to transcend through a re-focusing of anger at bin Laden, terrorist threats and, in the case of “The Daily Show” and The Onion, the media.

During this time period, The Onion featured many articles that centered on the premise of “getting back to normal” and what this might mean post-9/11. In its October 3, 2001 edition, The Onion began mocking the country’s call to return to normalcy in an article titled, “A Shattered Nation Longs to Care About Stupid Bullshit Again” (The Onion 2001, 37:35). Again, the use of obscenity serves as an angry demand that the world make sense, an emotion shared by most Americans. The article included a quotation from a psychologist: “It is a sign of our collective strength as a nation that we genuinely give a shit about the latest developments in the Cruise-Cruz romance” (The Onion 2001, 37:35). A return to simpler times would include replacing our worries over terrorism with speculation about celebrities, but this cannot happen
quickly: “Allow yourself time for a gradual return to the petty, shallow, meaningless little life that you led before the horrible tragedy” (The Onion 2001, 37:35). This indicates that healing will not be instantaneous despite any obscenity infused demand, but it will eventually occur, as also noted by Jon Stewart.

Another article that mocks this longing for a pre-9/11 life ran on October 10, 2001, “Dildo Manufacturers Association: Nation Must Return to Normalcy, Purchase Dildos” (The Onion 2001, 37:36). This mocks what “normalcy” actually entails. It is not simply being able to enjoy a baseball game or attend a play on Broadway, but involved many elements of U.S. life not regularly discussed in the mainstream media. Combining patriotism and sex toys, a spokesman for the Dildo Manufacturers Association stated: “But the best way we can show Osama bin Laden our resolve is for all of us to get back out there and buy dildos like we did before all of this happened” (The Onion 2001, 37:36). This trivializes calls for a return to normalcy that do not involve critical reflection. Coupling normalcy and dildos forces an obscene perspective by incongruity in order to define what constitutes “normal.” Additionally, ridiculing unconscious calls for a return to normal conveys anger over being told to move on without proper reflection on 9/11 and whether the attacks should perhaps change the way we live.

In addition to complicating what a return to normalcy entails, The Onion also mocks what was suggested as the cause of terrorism. This is illustrated in the November 7, 2001 article, “If I Don’t Get My Medium-Rare Shell Steak with Roasted Vegetables in the Next 10 Minutes, The Terrorists Have Already Won” (The Onion 2001, 37:40). The equation of poor restaurant service with terrorism is obviously exaggerated, but it serves as a critique of certain connections being made by politicians and media speculations about the alleged causes of 9/11. For example, if Broadway went dark, then the terrorists would have succeeded in altering our way of life in the
United States. *The Onion* extends this connection: “Surely, the busboy understands the connection between prompt water refills and liberty, doesn’t he?” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:40). This hyperbolic analogy interrogates what the American way of life entails. Not only does *The Onion* make “normal” problematic, but it also articulates a critique of reducing the freedoms of the U.S. to a good dining experience. Leno touched upon how U.S. capitalism is allegedly despised in some parts of the world, but *The Onion* moves beyond simply noting the hypocrisy to outline the slippery slope between capitalism and consumerism by choosing activities like purchasing dildos and eating in a restaurant as representative acts of American liberty.

A final example of the critique of normalcy from *The Onion* appeared in the December 19, 2001 edition: “What Is Sexy In The Wake of September 11?” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:46). While some may still argue that comedy and 9/11 should not appear in the same sentence, the link between sexy and September 11 is even more jarring. Within this article, it is noted that stories have been written about how 9/11 has affected ”dating, the hotel industry, stand-up comedy, leukemia research, high school football, antique collecting, and the parking situation in downtown Boston,” which prompted some journalists to demand articles about “new 9-11 ideas” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:46). There was a continued media focus on how 9/11 changed citizens’ daily lives, and *The Onion* satirically queried: “After the deaths of so many thousands of people, what turns us on?” (*The Onion* 2001, 37:46). Sex is a part of “normalcy,” but it appears crass when aligned with a tragedy that killed over 3,000 people. This both functions as a media critique and prompts a further reconsideration of what we consider “normal” after 9/11.

All of these examples of topical humor engage in varying degrees of satire, and as such they operate as both an “entertainer and critic, as clown and pundit” (Bloom 1979, 208-09). Because topical humor both entertains and informs, its role in society in the four months after the
attacks of September 11 was vital in helping the nation to adjust to a new kind of normalcy by critiquing the very notion of normalcy and being critically reflective about the production of topical humor in response to a tragedy. Because audiences required relief and release from sadness and fear, they sought out topical humor that helped them to make sense of a changed world through familiar jokes and articulations of common emotions, such as anger. While audiences after 9/11 were first attracted to the entertainment element of topical humor, they were eventually exposed to critiques and social correctives.

Despite all of the claims that mocking President Bush was totally off-limits, “Saturday Night Live” did parody the current administration early in its 27th season. In its second show, on October 6, 2001, Will Ferrell impersonated George W. Bush speaking to Osama bin Laden: “The American people are right behind me. You see, you made a big mistake. If you had any brains you would have challenged me to a game of Scrabble. Or maybe a beard-off. . . . Because if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s punishing evil-doers. If you don’t believe me, there’s over 200 guys in Texas you can ask” (Saturday Night Live, 10/06/01). Far from avoiding issues such as the President’s intellect, this skit indicates that bin Laden would have beaten President Bush in a game of Scrabble. Further, it reminds the audience of how many people were executed in Texas while President Bush was governor of that state.

On October 13, 2001, Darrell Hammond appeared as Dick Cheney addressing the military in Afghanistan: “I’m a one-man Afghani wrecking crew. . . . I’ve been here one week, I’ve personally destroyed 10 airports, countless radar installations, and the only Blockbuster Video in the whole damn country. . . . I’ve also shown a few of these women around here exactly what it means to be a gentleman” (Saturday Night Live, 10/13/01). This skit portrays Cheney as a tough-talking hero taking business into his own hands while in Afghanistan. It also alludes to
cultural differences, such as how women are treated, one of the stated purposes for liberating Afghanistan from the Taliban. “Cheney’s” actions convey the superiority of the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, with the Vice President, a man suffering from heart disease, taking on the entire country single-handedly.

There was also a skit about returning to normal done on November 3, 2001. John Ashcroft was parodied addressing the nation: “These are indeed complicated times for our great nation. But tonight, the United States Justice Department simply wishes to say: ‘Get on with your lives.’ Do whatever you would normally do. Also, in the next three days there is probably gonna be a terrorist attack on our country” (Saturday Night Live, 11/03/01). Clearly, it is difficult to return to normal with the threat of another attack looming on the horizon. “Ashcroft” forced the acknowledgment that any return to normal is unlikely given the changed status of life after 9/11, similar to The Onion’s observations about how normal is currently being construed. The interrogation of “normalcy” pre- and post-9/11 continues in the next phases of topical humor, which address the nation’s moves towards acceptance and adaptation to 9/11.

Donald Rumsfeld was also parodied on “Saturday Night Live.” On November 17, 2001, he gave a “press briefing” wherein he berated the reporters and failed to answer any of their questions. “Alright then, I have a question,” said “Rumsfeld,” “Why am I doing this? I had a satisfying, highly paid job in the private sector. What would possess me to take this job so I could stand here, day after day, and answer a lot of fool questions from a collection of cretins, hacks and angry lesbians such as yourselves?” (Saturday Night Live, 11/17/01). This skit is a commentary on the relationship between the press corps and the Bush administration, and the specific use of lesbians as an epithet also conveys an assumed attitude held by the executive branch regarding homosexuality.
The administration as a whole is mocked on December 8, 2001 when a discussion among George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld is parodied. As the war in Afghanistan is thought to be winding down, Bush states: “the time is fast approaching when we will have to deal with Mr. Saddam Hussein to finish a job that should have been finished 10 years ago. Thanks, Dad” (Saturday Night Live, 12/08/01). The Onion also referenced the history of the first President Bush’s involvement in the Middle East, and “Saturday Night Live” also made this connection. The mention of Saddam Hussein in combination with the war on terror in December of 2001 precedes the actual invasion that took place on March 20, 2003. This skit predicts the United States invasion of Iraq by over a year, even before the administration made a public connection between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. The skit frames the invasion of Iraq as a humorous action for the administration to undertake because of Iraq’s unclear involvement in 9/11.

The very existence of these sketches is surprising considering all of the statements that President Bush was off limits as a target of humor. “Saturday Night Live” did not ruffle any feathers, however. In fact, all of the skits that parodied President Bush and his administration were well received by average viewers and the White House, alike. Dick Cheney met Diane Sawyer on November 30, 2001 for an interview on “Good Morning America” and said that he thought the impersonations of him were “superb,” especially “the one where I [Cheney] was on the case in Kandahar, Afghanistan” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 11/30/01). John Ashcroft also liked what he heard about “Saturday Night Live” and told Brit Hume on December 2 that he “might have to start watching NBC instead of Fox if they’ve got that good of material” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 12/02/01).
Even though there was great worry over the treatment of President Bush in works of comedy, “Saturday Night Live” quickly returned to its usual format of parodying political figures in comedy sketches. This practice demonstrates an overlap between politics and entertainment, leading some theorists to argue that “humor could potentially act as a valid form of political argument” (Smith and Voth 2002, 1). Such an argument has merit because, as evidenced in the various examples noted above, topical humor is one way to present current events as well as to help us to deal with them. This becomes even more important in times of tragedy, when the very existence of topical humor provides the potential to alter intellectual perspectives and/or to provide an emotional catharsis.

**Conclusion: Humor’s Double Voice**

There is a difference between one’s attitude toward a situation and the situation itself, as noted by Burke in his treatment of the comic frame. Horace Walpole expressed this in a different way: “The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel” (Levin 1987, 9). This brings us back to the relationship between intellect and emotion in topical humor, especially as it relates to a national tragedy. Topical humorists explicitly addressed extreme emotions and commented on the role of humor in society before the production of humor could take place again after 9/11. Bill Maher is the negative example, but Jay Leno, Jon Stewart, David Letterman, “Saturday Night Live,” and *The Onion* all successfully struck a balance between emotion and intellect by first acknowledging emotion and then slowly introducing comic correctives.

Both Burke and Morreall contend that humor functions as the catalyst to move someone from a state of negative emotions to that of a comic perspective or attitude. We participate in humor during times of tragedy as a way to demonize enemies and create a sense of superiority.
When Osama bin Laden is used as a source of humor, it directs our anger to the perpetrator of the tragic attacks, helping to alleviate anxiety. Topical humor helps to channel other negative emotions into anger toward our enemies, which helped begin the progression from rage to acceptance to adaptation, stages that will be covered in subsequent chapters. Anger was also expressed over the lack of reflection on what constitutes “normal” for Americans, in addition to a critique of media coverage that focused on national fear and anxiety.

Upon initial reflection, most people assume that tragedy and comedy are polar opposites, but in modernity the comic and tragic are no longer considered mutually exclusive (Sypher 1956, 193). These concepts overlap and intersect, as demonstrated by jokes on late night television and articles in *The Onion* that framed the events surrounding 9/11 within a comic lens capable of providing transcendence and a comic corrective. When one considers the comic and tragic to be attitudes rather than stationary realms of reality, it is possible to move from one to the other after exposure to a catharsis. Both tragedy and comedy can provide catharses (Sutton 1994, 2-3), and movement between these perspectives is also possible.

While movement between frames can occur, being able to see the world simultaneously as both comic and tragic is often considered impossible. In examining the work of ACT/UP in response to the AIDS crisis, Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson contend that the comic frame can destroy the tragic frame and that “there may be recurring social conditions for which rhetoric in the comic frame is the only sensible response” (Christiansen and Hanson 1996, 166-67). I suggest that one of these “recurring social conditions” is tragedy itself. Rather than destroying the tragic frame or ignoring a tragic event, the comic frame alters our attitude towards and responses to tragedies, whether on a national scale or on an individual basis. Mel Brooks
humorously expressed how one’s perspective fundamentally alters a situation: “Tragedy is me cutting my finger; comedy is you falling down a manhole and dying” (in Morreall 1987, 38).

I return now to John Morreall, who contends that humor and tragedy are dialectical opposites and that they each “embody different visions of the human condition” (Morreall 1999, 12). This does not eliminate the possibility that an individual may move between comic and tragic perspectives depending on events in one’s life, but it does assert that one can hold only a single perspective at a time. Morreall contends that the “[t]ragic vision . . . celebrates emotions like anger, fear, and sadness” (Morreall 1999, 148), while the comic perspective allows us “to see ourselves from the outside rather than from a self-privileging perspective . . . [and to] see ourselves in social perspective” (Morreall 1999, 148; 38). Because comedy affords a broader perspective on events, Morreall claims that “[t]he comic vision is more profound and insightful than the tragic” because it allows for a communal view capable of moving beyond a tragedy (Morreall 1999, 147). This is in line with Burke’s conception of the comic frame, a focus that relies upon attitude rather than events. Thus, while comic and tragic attitudes may be dialectical opposites, tragedy can be viewed from within the comic frame or vision but the reverse is not true.

Topical humorists facilitated the move from a tragic to a comic frame in the four months after 9/11 by speaking in a double voice; the comic vision (Morreall) and/or the use of the comic frame (Burke) traffics in such duality. Topical humor addressed tragedy by crafting humorous discourse that employed both emotion and intellect, concepts considered to be dialectically opposed. In addition to dealing with the dualities of comedy and tragedy, emotion and intellect, another double voice emerged in the satire of *The Onion* and “The Daily Show.” These discourses mock not only the news but also the newsmakers, creating a two-pronged critique of
both content and form. Additionally, all of the discourses presented herein function as both
information and entertainment, which is the essential structure of topical humor due to its
reliance on jokes about current events as a source of invention. The comic frame/comic vision is
used to contextualize these stories.

The double voice found in topical humor makes this discourse uniquely capable of
addressing and transcending a tragedy, even while the tragic events are ongoing. In examining
the humor that was produced by Vietnam POWs when they were in captivity, Heinman notes, “a
sense of humor is important for rebounding from many different types of adversity” (Heinman
2001, 85). Humor does not overlook tragedy; rather, it re-frames a tragic situation in order to
foster a change in attitude, like helping war prisoners endure pain and suffering. Heinman
further contends that humor is a “potent agent for psychological removal from stressful
situations” (Heinman 2001, 87). The focus on the psychological elements in humor indicates
that when physical (or temporal) removal from a horrible situation is impossible, humor may
provide a means to escape. There was no way to rewind reality and erase the attacks of
September 11, 2001 and so it was necessary to change the attitudes toward the tragedy as a
means to move beyond paralyzing emotions like fear and anxiety. This could be accomplished
only through the dual voice expressed in topical humor.

This is exactly what Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, The Onion and “Saturday
Night Live” did in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: they directly addressed the tragedy and
framed it within a comic perspective to allow for audiences to attain a comic vision. Rather than
ignore the horror suffered within the United States, these comic guardians first expressed their
own sadness and openly contemplated how humor might be able to help the country deal with
the tragedy. Then slowly and often self-consciously, humor began to re-emerge on late night
television and within the pages of The Onion. These primary texts indicate the broad perspective afforded by a comic attitude and the variety of topical humor produced relating to the tragedy of 9/11.

Being able to frame a tragedy within a comic perspective was not easy and there were casualties along the way (e.g. Bill Maher). But successful attempts were noticed and applauded. On September 23, 2001, Mayor Rudy Giuliani appeared on Dave Letterman’s show and told him that Letterman “restored confidence” simply by returning to work (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/24/01). Hillary Clinton told Letterman that he “did the country a great service” when he brought his show back (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/28/01). Additionally, the guests appearing on late night television during the first four months after the attacks were not the usual Hollywood celebrities or famous musicians. Instead, figures like former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman appeared to discuss current events with Letterman and Leno (Heller 2004, 3), indicating that a higher level of public discussion was taking place on late night television.

The role of topical humorists in the wake of 9/11 was uncertain and dangerous, as evidenced by the explicit self-reflection on the air and the careful balance struck between emotions and intellect in the content of these shows and articles in The Onion. Similar to previous tragedies in the United States, the country looked to topical humorists to help alter and expand their tragic vision. Humor can re-frame a tragedy and offer a catalyst to move beyond negative emotional states, something late night television and The Onion continued to do at the beginning of 2002. While not all instances of humor relating to anger about the events of 9/11 are included in this chapter, and some examples extend beyond this four month period of time after the attacks, the emergence of anger as a focus for topical humor in the early stages after the
attacks is clear. Topical humor helped the nation to begin the process of healing through humorous expressions of anger directed at Osama bin Laden, the media and those in power. While some overlap of these stages certainly occurs, there was a steady progression in the nation from anger to acceptance to adaptation, as will be evidenced in the examples of topical humor contained in next two chapters.
January 2002 was the start of a new year, and like any other year, many events, topics of interest, and ongoing crises carried over from the previous year. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan commenced in October 2001 and continued in 2002. This represented the first battle in the war on terror, the goals of which were to overturn the Taliban regime and find Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks of September 11, 2001. More information became available about the “American Taliban,” John Walker Lindh, who was captured on November 25, 2001 and indicted on February 5, 2002. That a United States citizen from an affluent town in California went to Afghanistan to fight for Osama bin Laden caused much concern and alarm. Airport security within the United States underwent changes in 2001 that continued in 2002 as a means to prevent future attacks using airplanes as weapons, thus subjecting airline passengers to increasingly longer waits at security check points. And the investigation of the Enron Corporation that began in October 2001 led to Congressional hearings in January of 2002.

The link among the majority of these news stories was September 11: the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan, a home-grown terrorist, and airport security all stem directly from the terrorist attacks that took place in the fall of 2001. Since topical humor focuses on contemporary events, it should come as no surprise that the above stories were grist for the humor mill in the beginning of 2002. While extreme emotions, specifically anger, were a main theme in topical humor during approximately the four months after 9/11, more intellectual elements began to emerge in the topical humor produced in 2002. As previously noted, no criticisms concerning
responses to 9/11 were possible in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Rather, the nation sought comfort in familiar jokes and jabs that directed anger at new enemies or at the media’s attempts to keep us frightened and anxious over new threats.

But even these tentative forays into topical humor could come about only after topical humorists exhibited the appropriate pathos relating to 9/11. After topical humor helped express and expunge the nation’s anger toward targets capable of releasing a build up of negative emotions relating to the attacks (e.g. Osama bin Laden) or identified targets that bridged the pre- and post-9/11 world (e.g. Bill Clinton), the nation could move toward acceptance of the events. Acceptance is the second stage of humor relating to a tragedy (Morrow 1987, 182), but acceptance should not be equated with passive acquiescence or approval. Rather, I use the term acceptance to refer to the ability to tolerate the conditions brought about in the wake of 9/11, a capacity reflected in topical humor produced in early 2002. Indeed, I will use the terms acceptance and tolerance interchangeably in this chapter.

This second stage is an in-between phase, a period of time that straddles anger and adaptation and represents the struggle that the nation went through in coming to terms with the fact that a devastating tragedy occurred. It may seem impossible that citizens of the United States could accept the events of 9/11 five short months after the attacks, but tracking the discourse of topical humor shows that this adjustment did occur, albeit slowly. The stages of anger, acceptance and adaptation overlap somewhat due to the fact that each phase is somewhat transitional, but there is a clear progression that can be tracked chronologically. Topical humorists both reflected and encouraged the nation’s acceptance of 9/11 in the first few months of 2002, as evidenced in the substance of the examples contained within this chapter.
The fortitude of the nation was both facilitated and evidenced in topical humor that ridiculed responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, such as the color coded advisory system and the Bush Administration’s tactics in handling the newly burgeoning “War on Terror.” Acceptance was also encouraged by ongoing comparisons (like those found in the previous chapter) of bin Laden, Afghanistan, and terrorism to more familiar people and ideas, especially those taken from popular culture and current events. Before delving into the primary texts, I must first introduce a main reason that topical humorists are well suited to usher the nation from anger to acceptance, and eventually to adaptation: the conspiracy between producers and receivers of humor.

**A Comedic Conspiracy**

The comedic conspiracy is formed between all comedians and their audiences due to an expectation inherent in all comedic genres: receivers expect to be entertained. In exchange for this entertainment, audiences for humor agree to participate in and decode a discourse that employs language games (e.g. puns, irony) and frequently transcends normal social boundaries (e.g. ridiculing rather than respecting those in power). Freud alluded to this reciprocal relationship by noting that audiences allow themselves to be duped when they receive a joke (Freud [1905] 1960, 92). However, self-deception falls short of fully describing the give and take that occurs between audiences and producers of topical humor because of the need for receivers to use intellect in order to interpret many examples of humorous discourse. Freud’s point is important because it conveys the willingness of and need for audiences to become a part of the comedic event, but the term conspiracy is more accurate because it indicates the agreement among producers and receivers to jointly participate in the creation and meaning of this discourse.
Elizabeth O’Regan found that audiences have similarly participated in the conspiracy of humor dating back to the Fifth Century (O'Regan 1992). She goes even further by asserting that every example of “skillful speech,” for example Aristophanes’ play *The Clouds*, both requires and engenders this cooperation from audiences. She states:

> The notion of psychic complicity provoked by the pleasures of skillful speech has several advantages: it explains the possibility of persuasion and its results, justifies rhetoric as an art that can be taught and learned independently of what is to be said, and revives the normal understanding that persuasion proceeds with the compliance of the listener (O’Regan 1992, 16).

O’Regan rightly notes that all persuasion depends upon the compliance of the listener, and humor is no exception. Katherine Geffcken also addresses the conspiracy of humor, and it is from her work that I have taken this term. In an examination of one of Cicero’s speeches that relies upon humor, the *Pro Caelio*, Geffcken contends that the orator created a “conspiracy of understanding” with his audience in arguing on behalf of his client’s innocence (Geffcken 1973, 12). The conspiracy was created by mentioning current events that the audience would be aware of, as well as engaging in a typical comedic strategy of mocking people in positions of power to advance the cause of the common people (Geffcken 1973, 12). Cicero pandered to his audience by including points of reference that they would be familiar with, in addition to elevating them above more powerful people through the use of ridicule. Such tactics are a conspiratorial process that separates those who mock from those who are mocked, a process that is carried on to this day by Leno, Letterman, and “Saturday Night Live,” and *The Onion*. Audiences for topical humor expect such mocking to take place, and thus they agree to participate in an act of ridicule when they receive this discourse.
Successful communication ultimately depends upon the involvement of a willing audience. Humor facilitates listeners’ compliance due to its conspiratorial nature that encourages audiences to partake in a discourse that does not typically engage in straightforward expressions. Rather, humor employs irony, hyperbole, and other language games that requires some sort of interpretation and/or decoding from the audience. *The Onion* traffics in satire, but a reader who is not aware that the newspaper is not in fact “real” would completely miss the humor. Therefore, audiences of topical humor are aware that there will be some work involved in order to understand the discourse and are willing to undertake it. Such prior agreement is indicative of a conspiracy, not to commit a crime, but to create a work of discourse.

Audience involvement is certainly important in all forms of discourse, but the conspiracy that is formed in the production of humor increases the amount of participation required of the receivers. Topical humorists coat both tragic and mundane events in a cloak of wit, but the audience must work in order to identify language games (e.g. puns, sarcasm) used in the creation of humor. When audiences are able to decode this playful use of language and uncover the humor, they experience a sense of satisfaction on two levels. The first is that they are “in on” the humor, making them participants – co-conspirators – in a discursive event. The second occurs when they successfully make an inference, and the more difficult the connection between incongruous items, the more satisfaction this would create in an audience member.

Burke refers to this dual experience as “satisfaction of authorship,” which occurs when receivers feel that they have helped to write the joke because they are able to supply the inference alluded to by topical humorists (Burke 1967, 338). This satisfaction serves to deepen the level of conspiracy that takes place between producers of humor and their audiences. Indeed, the harder that an audience works to understand examples of humor, the more satisfaction they
will experience as a result of their labor and the more conspiratorial the discourse potentially becomes. A divide is formed between those who understand and those who do not, in addition to the separation of the mockers from those who are the mocked. Not all works of humor require audiences to fill in gaps or make inferences, but the discourses under examination in this study frequently rely upon receivers’ participation in order for the jokes to be understood.

Some of these differences in styles of humor were addressed in classical rhetorical theory. Aristotle posited a difference between buffoonery and irony (Aristotle 1984, 1419b: 598); Cicero distinguished between a buffoon and an orator who employs humor strategically (Cicero 2001, 2:247); and Quintilian differentiated physical humor from verbal wit (Quintilian [1920] 2001, 6.3, 25). These broad divisions still have relevance in contemporary culture, with topical humorists falling into the category of wits due to their reliance on and knowledge of current events, as evidenced in examples contained within the first chapter. Wits have been producing critical commentary about current events in the United States throughout its history.

The conspiracy that occurs among topical humorists and their audiences is strengthened by the “satisfaction of authorship,” but this relationship also increases the potential for audiences to be influenced. When auditors are made to feel a part of the production of a discourse, then the producer’s attitude, which is conveyed through his or her comments, is also more easily adopted by the receivers. Because most audiences for topical humor are self-selecting, they necessarily afford the humorist a high level of ethos. Positive feelings toward a humorist further affect how a message is received and interpreted, allowing for the possibility that audience members will adopt the attitude conveyed in an example of topical humor (if the attitude is not already held by a receiver). This can also influence subsequent responses to other messages about the same topic.
In a study concerning the use of humor in political campaign advertisements, Michael Pfau, Roxanne Parrott and Bridget Lindquist determined that ethos was a major element in the potential persuasiveness of humor: “when a high credibility source employs intense or highly opinionated language, it causes anxiety, and therefore pressure to change, on the part of those receivers who disagree. However, when a low credibility source uses intense or opinionated language it is met with derogation” (Pfau, Parrott and Lindquist 1992, 243). Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live,” and The Onion all have high credibility among their audiences, and their humor often employs intense and highly opinionated language about current events.

While audiences may not feel pressure to agree with the hosts on everything that they say, the comic vision conveyed through the use of topical humor is likely to be appreciated if not adopted. Topical humorists consistently convey attitudes about current events within their humor. The worldview contained within humorous discourse is influential because of the conspiratorial relationship inherent in humor, as well as the high credibility (a/k/a positive ethos) afforded to topical humorists by their audiences. Indeed, humor itself is a highly persuasive form of discourse because of its potential to entertain and inform. Expecting to be entertained, the receivers are less resistant to accepting the humorists’ attitudes; having participated in understanding the message, they are more likely to persuade themselves of its truth. This relationship certainly existed in the first four months post-9/11; however, the conspiratorial nature of the humor produced during the acceptance phase included a return to the ridicule of national leaders and current events, as opposed to the humor that occurred immediately after the attacks that focused anger on common enemies.

In his study concerning whether satire can produce a change in attitudes toward a given topic, Larry Powell exposed college audiences to two lectures, one that included satire and one
that did not, in order to determine any differences in reception. Specifically, Powell wanted
to discern whether satire could be used to “influence[e] responses to subsequent
counterarguments” (Powell 1978, 116). Powell’s analysis found that the speaker who used satire
was thought to be “more at ease,” more interesting, and “was perceived as giving a better
analysis of the problem despite receiving lower ratings on organization” (Powell 1978, 124).
Audiences found that the use of satire conveyed “an in-depth understanding and analysis” of the
issue discussed, implying that the content matter was received favorably even if the structure was
not (Powell 1978, 124). What Powell’s findings suggest is that the use of satire favorably
disposes an audience to the viewpoint espoused in the satiric discourse. Additionally, Powell
found that satire can influence “responses to subsequent counterarguments” and that “the
effectiveness of satire as an inoculation treatment may be at least partially based upon its ability
to generate negative reactions to the counterargument presentation” (Powell 1978, 116; 124).

Powell’s use of the term inoculation needs to be unpacked a bit, and an overview of satire
as a specific genre should be instructive. Fully understanding a work of satire typically requires
some background information about the object being satirized in order for the work of humor to
be fully understood. For the satirist, he or she must have a thorough knowledge of the issues
underlying the target of humor in order for the construction of a successful mockery. An
example is Aristophanes’ The Clouds. O’Regan argues that this text’s masterful use of language
establishes a conspiracy between Aristophanes and his audience, but it is how this relationship is
formed that helps convey how a well-crafted satire influences the attitudes of the comedic
consumer.\footnote{O’Regan notes that the play she analyzes is actually Aristophanes’ second version of The Clouds. Her
examination is made all the more compelling and rich because she identifies ways in which the author educates his
audience about how to “read” the play in order to prevent the poor reception that the first attempt experienced. An}
The Clouds’ main characters, Strepsiades and Socrates, act in an exaggerated fashion as exemplars of an average citizen and the educated elite, respectively. Since both characters are portrayed in hyperbolic fashion, each comes across as foolish, ridiculous, and ultimately risible. The audience fails to identify with either character, thereby forcing an acknowledgment of the middle ground, a position articulated by Aristophanes in the character “Aristophanes” within the play. Satire presents opposing ideas as being extreme and doing so encourages the audience to locate a reasonable stance between these polar opposites. Being aware that there are moderate positions within any given controversy when exposed to future extreme arguments is what Powell refers to as “inoculation.” In essence, a radical argument will be less likely to sway an individual once the ridiculousness of that viewpoint is exposed through satire.

Powell’s concept of inoculation can thus be subsumed under the more generic term influence. Topical humor, along with satire, has the potential to influence audiences through an articulation of viewpoints because topical humorists, through hyperbole and/or understatement, traffic in exposing people or objects as being ridiculous. Audiences are forced to acknowledge the foolishness of current events and are further encouraged to critically reflect upon persons or news stories in order to understand why they are deserving of ridicule. Powell contends that satire influences audiences in two ways. First, satirical messages “motivate the respondent to construct defensive arguments,” and second, “satirical speech [can] generate negative responses to the non-entertaining presentation of the direct counterargument” (Powell 1978, 125).

The potential for satire to engender dual responses is consistent with the double voice of topical humor discussed previously. A specific example from this time period should help to

important addition to the second version of The Clouds is that of buffoonery, whereas the first version relied on wit alone (O'Regan 1992, 130). This is similar to the combination of wit and buffoonery that most topical humorists employ, as evidenced in their reference to both topics of serious concern and popular culture.
clarify Powell’s contention that satire provokes two responses. *The Onion*, in its continued
critique of what is “normal” post-September 11, ran an article entitled “Nation Welcomes Return
from months of Sept. 11-induced goodwill on Capitol Hill, Americans across the country have
longed for a return to good old-fashioned name-calling and finger-pointing” (*The Onion* 2002,
38:03). Upon reading such statements, audiences construct a defensive response against this
work of satire by calling into question the efficacy of partisan bickering to enhance the nation’s
well being.

Another way this article inspires audience skepticism comes in the form of a quote from a
homemaker:

> When I saw all those Senate members locking arms to sing ‘God Bless America’ right after Sept. 11, I cried. . . It was almost as if
the words ‘Democrat’ and ‘Republican’ didn’t mean anything
anymore. I said to my husband, ‘Has it really come to this?’ Now,
as the corrupt fat cats start pursuing their own greedy, self-interest-
driven agendas while hypocritically accusing their counterparts of
pork-barrel politics, it’s like seeing America return to greatness
(*The Onion* 2002, 38:03).

This values indicated in this statement are inverted, with senatorial unity evoking unease and
partisan greed a sign of greatness. Audiences likely responded negatively to such an equation, a
reaction necessary to facilitate an understanding of this work of satire. Additionally, the use of
humor makes this argument (partisanship is not a sign of greatness or a positive indication of
normalcy post-9/11) both entertaining and memorable. Audience members exposed to
subsequent arguments uncritically calling for a “return to normal” or signs of/calls for
partisanship will be met with negative reactions. In this way, satire influences audience
responses to the discourse itself, as well as influences future responses to arguments relating to the same topic.

Not surprisingly, Powell finds that college audiences prefer satiric speech to a more formal academic lecture due to the fact that it is more entertaining. But Powell also asserts a more complex conclusion: that audiences perceive satiric speakers as having a better understanding of an issue than non-satiric speakers and that satire encourages audiences to construct their own counterarguments. Anyone can recite rote facts about an issue, but it conveys more expertise to the audience when a topic is satirized, which helps receivers remember and develop their own defensive arguments on the same topic in the future. Powell’s study demonstrates that satire conveys information effectively and helps influence attitudes toward a particular topic. While Powell’s focus is on satire as a means of influence, the process of informing and fostering a particular outlook occurs with other types of humor as well, especially topical humor.

*The Onion* and “Saturday Night Live” produce satire in an extended format as compared to that used by Leno and Letterman, who generally rely upon one-liners in the construction of their topical humor. The brevity of the monologue format does not allow for a fully constructed satiric discourse, but Leno and Letterman also make individuals and events appear ridiculous, and thus their discourse is best understood as a truncated work of satire. Where *The Onion* and “Saturday Night Live” are able to parody both sides of a controversy, Leno and Letterman do so one position at a time, and thus competing viewpoints are not mocked simultaneously. However, topical humor’s consistent focus on current events suggests that late night audiences will be exposed to widespread mocking of the most important issues and people in the news. In this way, Leno and Letterman engage in satire, albeit in a shorter and more piecemeal manner.
Returning audiences are eventually subjected to a comprehensive satirical outlook on society, but these monologues can be enjoyed singly or as a body of work.

Topical humor’s ultimate goal is to entertain audiences by mocking everything, from Republican policies to Democratic candidates and all celebrities in between. This equal opportunity jesting primarily emerges from the most current stories covered in the news media, so some awareness of contemporary events is required in order to fully understand a joke on any given day. Attitudes and information about and towards current events, politicians and celebrities would still be very clear to audiences even if they consumed only discourses of topical humor as a source of news.11 Dannagal Goldthwaite Young contends that these late night entertainment programs can serve as “information surrogates” for people who do not watch the news because jokes referencing current events serve to “repackage” what journalists have already reported (Young 2004).

Young argues that late night television is merely a repackaging of items reported in the news media and discounts the potential for original or unique observations from comedians. However, in his analysis of the 2004 election, Michael Nitz discovered that late night “humor has the potential to both reinforce these images [key candidate traits and issues] and to stimulate new discussions” (Nitz 2004). Nitz further claims: “The results of this study are consistent with those that show humor on late night television comedy serves to help reshape and amplify key candidate traits and issues” (Nitz 2004). This assessment presents the case that humor does not merely repeat or reinforce what is reported in the mainstream media, but that topical humor

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11 This is a trend that is becoming increasingly common, especially among 18-29 year olds, as 21% of this demographic claimed to learn about the 2004 election from The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live, while 13% of the same group reported that their information about the last election came from Jay Leno or David Letterman (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004).
contributes something new with the potential to change audience attitudes towards people and events.

The relationship among audiences and producers of humor creates a bond that affords humorists positive ethos, which allows them to influence audience attitudes. Additionally, a sense of satisfaction occurs within audience members who feel a part of the discursive event, a satisfaction that is increased when decoding is required in order to discern the meaning of an ironic phrase, to recognize sarcasm, or to complete an enthymeme that requires knowledge of current or past events. Instilling a sense of participation and satisfaction within an audience makes a speaker more influential, and this approval carries over into future exposures to discourse relating to similar content. The fact that audiences do not expect to be persuaded by topical humor also makes them more open to influence because their defenses are down. In fact, the very format of topical humor carries its own persuasive potential, as outlined by Nitz.

Topical humor is more memorable because it stands out from non-humorous types of discourse, as indicated by Powell’s comparison of satiric and serious academic lectures. Texts that employ satire are more favorably received, and also influence future consumption of discourses that address the same topics. In other words, topical humor can affect audience attitudes about a person or event and can “prime” listeners with respect to subsequent messages. Providing the nation with an emotional release and relief from a tragic event is one manner in which topical humor influenced audience attitudes after September 11. But after proper acknowledgement was made regarding the emotional impact of the tragedy, the nation had to progress beyond feelings of grief, fear and anger. Topical humor facilitated this progression by directing negative emotions to appropriate topics of anger, such as Osama bin Laden, or a return to familiar jokes, like those at the expense of Bill Clinton. Laughter at bin Laden helped purge
anger while jokes about Clinton reminded the nation of a simpler time, both of which helped the nation to tolerate the reality of the events of 9/11.

The Onion, “Saturday Night Live,” David Letterman and Jay Leno\textsuperscript{12} helped audiences to move from anger to acceptance by connecting the changed world to more familiar themes, but they also began to articulate subtle critiques about the Bush Administration and the trajectory of the war on terror once audiences were ready to receive such criticisms. Audiences slowly began to engage in critical reflection on matters of importance instead of being held captive by extreme emotions that potentially interfered with a proper perspective on current events. Topical humor reflects this change in attitude. Some of the humor produced during the first four months of 2002 focused on Osama bin Laden and the nation’s anger, but topical humorists also began to reflect and facilitate nation’s acceptance/tolerance by engaging in the practice of ridicule.

Ridicule Breeds Acceptance

In early 2002, many video games appeared on the Internet that served as outlets for anger directed at Osama bin Laden. One featured a photo of bin Laden’s head on a cartoon body with names like “Whack Osama,” “Nowhere to Run,” and, “Bin Laden Blaster.” The goal for each game was to kill Osama, and venting aggression against the mastermind behind the attacks of 9/11 is clearly the main objective of these cartoons. The military’s search for bin Laden was also mocked in “Nowhere to Run,” a site that featured a crude image of President Bush playing conga drums while an equally cartoonish Colin Powell sang, “Day O! I said day, I said day-ay-ay O.

\textsuperscript{12} I was unable to obtain transcripts from “The Daily Show” for this time period. Repeated requests and e-mail inquiries to Comedy Central and “The Daily Show” were unsuccessful, as well as a search for private collections. Transcripts are now available through “The Hotline: Laugh Track,” but consistent entries begin in early 2003, which is beyond the timeline for this project.
Daylight come and we drop de bomb. Come Mr. Taliban, turn over Bin Laden,” sung to the
tune of the “Banana Boat Song” (Boxer 2004). 13

These interactive Internet sites vilify bin Laden and allow average citizens to virtually
hunt and kill him as a punishment for organizing the 9/11 attacks. Uniting against a common
enemy during times of crisis is not a new practice; many editorial cartoons mocked Germany and
Japan during World War II. But the existence of websites that allowed people to find and
execute bin Laden went beyond the demonization of an enemy, as noted by Daniel Kurtzman:

Web humorists devised what seemed like a million comic ways to
capture and blow up the terrorist mastermind in a series of games
and cartoon animations that succeeded brilliantly where the U.S.
military was failing. Other parodies drew upon references from
American popular culture, mocking bin Laden and the Taliban in
joke ads for Jihad Joe and Taliban Barbie dolls, as well as in
rewrites of classic songs titled 50 Ways to Kill bin Laden and
Osama Got Run Over by a Reindeer (Kurtzman 2002).

Kurtzman suggests that players of these games may have experienced satisfaction because they
were successful in capturing/killing bin Laden when military efforts failed. A reliance on
national anger was the foundation for these websites, but the nation did not remain in a
singularly focused state of rage.

While Internet sites sought out visitors to engage in the virtual hunt for Osama bin Laden,
the frequency of jokes on late night television about the same subject began to drop, indicating
that topical humor and the nation was moving from a focus on anger to that of an attitude of
acceptance toward the attacks. From the period of September 11, 2001 to December 31, 2001, a

13 Interestingly, almost identical images were used on subsequent websites that mocked Saddam Hussein (e.g. “All I
Want Is to Smacky an Iraqi”), but also re-emerged close to the 2004 presidential election to mock President Bush
(e.g. “Our President Needs Your Help” was a game in which you hit the president every time he orders a drink). This
exemplifies how repetition impacts a joke. Since humorous Internet sites frequently provide links to other sites
containing humor, audiences would likely have been exposed to most of these examples. Prior knowledge of pre-
existing websites adds additional layers to the inferences a receiver supplies in order to “get” a joke, therefore
increasing the level of satisfaction among those with previous exposure to similar types of humor. As noted by New
York Times critic Sarah Boxer, “Repetition is always funny. Repetition is always funny” (Boxer 2004).
total of 207 jokes about bin Laden were told by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O’Brien, but this total sunk to a mere 30 jokes for the equivalent period of time from January 1, 2002 to April 30, 2002 (The Center for Media and Public Affairs 2002). Some jokes still centered on Osama bin Laden, but rarely were the jokes solely about the 9/11 mastermind. Instead, David Letterman and Jay Leno introduced observations about bin Laden that compared him to other people or events that were in the news.

For example, David Letterman quipped: “The Pentagon thinks now that Osama bin Laden is still alive. This guy has survived more bombs than CBS” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/08/02); “Apparently, Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden have escaped Afghanistan together on motorcycles, and they’re going to make a movie about it. They’re going to call it Easy Qaeda,” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/09/02); “There’s a new Osama bin Laden video. In it, he’s calling for the Patriots to rise up and defeat the Rams” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/01/02); and “Relatives of Osama bin Laden say he’s still alive. Not only is he alive but he’s turned down a big offer from ABC to stay in Afghanistan” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 03/20/02).

All of these comments made bin Laden seem more familiar through comparisons to less threatening concepts, helping audiences to accept the presence of a terrorist within a context of everyday events, such as network ratings wars, references to popular movies of the past, the current NFL season, and the “late night wars” taking place in early 2002 over anchorman Ted Koppel, among others. These comparisons may be read as trivializing the hunt for bin Laden, but they are better understood as assuaging fears over future attacks or venting anger about past terrorist activities. More importantly, framing bin Laden within a context of cultural products from the United States makes him less threatening, while simultaneously reminding audiences
that bin Laden was just one more thing in the news. In this way, Osama bin Laden is only one part of everyday life, thus reflecting citizens’ tolerance of his continued presence so they could focus on other events in the news.

Jay Leno also made observations about bin Laden: “Bush announced he wants to return food stamps to all immigrants who are in this country legally. Legal immigrants? And you thought it was hard finding Osama bin Laden” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/17/02); “I saw that Osama bin Laden video on CNN over the weekend. He looks bad. He looks old, he looks tired, he was incoherent. Then I saw it was ‘Larry King Weekend’” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/05/02); and “New clues that Osama bin Laden may not be dead after all. First he’s dead, then he’s alive. This guy has been pronounced dead more times than Dick Cheney” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/27/02). Each of these comments also puts bin Laden into a broader context of current events in the U.S., ranging from a proposed change in the status of legal immigrants to the health of the Vice President. While Letterman fabricated a text for the most recent bin Laden video, Leno focused solely on image. In both cases, neither talk show host addressed the content of the terrorist’s videotape. This avoidance of the actual message served to silence bin Laden, relegating him to a set-up for jokes about professional football or the aging Larry King. In failing to directly report what bin Laden said, Leno and Letterman framed the terrorist as non-threatening and the object of humor, which enables the nation to move beyond any paralyzing fear or anger experienced in the aftermath of 9/11. Audiences moved toward an uneasy tolerance of bin Laden, an acceptance reflected by the change in jokes about him and agreement that the terrorist was a proper object of ridicule.

Letterman and Leno made similar jokes when they compared bin Laden and a U.S. corporate executive. Letterman stated: “Well, the manhunt continues for that elusive evil
mastermind, but I’m telling you Enron CEO Kenneth Lay remains at large,” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/18/02). Leno commented: “Today the United States has admitted that after months and months of searching, we still have no idea where Osama bin Laden is. Osama bin Laden? We can’t even find Kenneth Lay” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/07/02). Reporting of the Enron scandal began in January of 2002, when the Justice Department confirmed that a criminal investigation was underway. Comparing bin Laden to popular culture events and people may help to allay national fears about future terrorist attacks, but juxtaposing bin Laden with Kenneth Lay functions in a different way.

The comparison of bin Laden and Lay equates the terrorist activities against the United States on September 11, 2001 with the actions of a criminally negligent CEO who ruined an energy corporation and the economic future of its employees. This analogy places international terrorism on a level with a national corporate crisis. These comparisons could also be read as an argument *a fortiori*: if the government cannot even find the domestic criminal Lay, they will be less likely to find bin Laden, as international terrorist. However, the reminder to audiences that both domestic and international issues require attention was an important point to make. Rather than reduce the importance of 9/11 or relieve anxiety over potential future attacks – as I interpreted from the above examples – the linking of Lay and bin Laden places the Enron scandal in a more serious light. Kenneth Lay was sought for questioning before a government body but could not be found, certainly a more serious charge than calling Larry King old or referencing the well-known fact that Dick Cheney suffers from a heart condition. Osama bin Laden can be compared to certain people in a manner that helps to relieve anxiety, but other comparisons could serve to heighten the seriousness of another problem, such as the Enron scandal.
In contrast to the hunt for bin Laden being similar to the search for Kenneth Lay, Jay Leno made another comparison between contemporaneous searches: “The government announced today that it is going after Miss Cleo. What happened to Osama bin Laden? Weren’t we going after him? I guess he was too hard so we have to go after Miss Cleo instead” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/26/02). Miss Cleo was an alleged psychic who operated a fraudulent phone hotline, which prompted a criminal investigation. Pretending to be clairvoyant and instigating a terrorist attack on the United States are not equivalent crimes. Leno’s comment intimates that Miss Cleo will be easier to find than Osama bin Laden, which is more a critique of the search itself than the target of investigation. This is not how Kenneth Lay was portrayed by Leno and Letterman. Lay is deemed an equal with bin Laden, thus casting the Enron CEO as the latest devil to commit crimes within and against the United States. Osama bin Laden is used to demonize Kenneth Lay, while Miss Cleo serves to minimize the anxiety over the failed manhunt.

The critique of Kenneth Lay was not the only joke that Letterman and Leno used to raise awareness about an ongoing crisis. Letterman made a critical observation about the U.S. search for bin Laden: “The CIA is now saying that a drone rocket may have killed Osama bin Laden way up in the mountains. That’s what the CIA is saying. Now, let me translate for you. What they’re saying is he’s still alive and they don’t have any idea where the hell he is” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/08/02). Letterman’s “translation” suggests that the CIA has not been forthcoming with the American public about the search for bin Laden. The hesitancy to confirm the death of bin Laden required clarification. Letterman and his writers felt the need to decode the CIA’s statement for the audience. This particular observation calls into question the veracity of intelligence reports in the ongoing and seemingly fruitless search for bin Laden.
Jay Leno also critiqued the hunt for Osama: “After what they said was an exhaustive investigation, the Defense Minister of France said today that Osama bin Laden is either still in hiding in Afghanistan, he may have escaped to Pakistan, or he may be dead. Hey, France, thanks a lot. We’ll take it from here. Hard to believe they were invaded twice” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 03/11/02). The obvious target of this joke is France. The phrasing of this particular observation also seems to indicate the United States was just getting involved in the search – “We’ll take it from here.” Further, France’s poor military history and admission of not knowing where bin Laden is conveys the sense that the United States will certainly fare better in this endeavor. This comment functions as a means to assert the primacy of the United States military over France and its perceived ineptitude, rather than a critique of the heretofore unsuccessful search for bin Laden.

While Letterman and Leno did address the search for bin Laden within their monologues, the manner in which they did so varied over the course of the first part of 2002 in stark contrast to the interactive games found on the Internet. At first, bin Laden was compared with innocuous cultural events like the professional football games, but the emergence of the Enron hearings allowed for more trenchant observations about the potential devastation enacted by CEO Kenneth Lay. Letterman’s critique against the CIA coincided with an intelligence report and Leno’s diatribe against France was also in response to a published account regarding the lack of progress in the search for bin Laden.

These comments about bin Laden connect him to other current events in the news instead of focusing singly on bin Laden as an individual. Specifically, the comparisons between Kenneth Lay and Osama bin Laden may be read as either minimizing the threat from bin Laden or maximizing the crimes committed by Lay. The dual tactic of inflating worry over one topic
by deflating concern over another is a customary comedic strategy that is usually employed in works of satire, indicating that this genre can be expressed in the truncated form used by Leno and Letterman. Both hyperbole and understatement can be used as tools to present a person or event as ridiculous, and the juxtaposition of Lay and bin Laden places the manhunt for a terrorist next to the search for a white-collar criminal.

The equation of both men as criminals being sought by the government reminds audiences that there are other topics of concern that need to be acknowledged in the post-9/11 world. Bin Laden is not unique in his criminal actions against the United States and maintaining a singular anger, let alone only one manhunt, for a single perpetrator when other crimes are taking place and criminals are on the lam is irresponsible. The nation had to tolerate the fact that bin Laden was missing because the United States needed to investigate other crimes not relating to international terrorism since illegal actions had not ceased just because of 9/11. Topical humor moved beyond 9/11 and bin Laden because other important events had to be addressed. While time initially felt like it had stopped after 9/11, it did not. Other people and events were brought to the nation’s attention through ridicule on late night television.

Letterman and Leno made humorous comments about other events in the news, like the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah. Former President Clinton and his affair with Monica Lewinsky also continued to be a part of topical humor, and David Letterman made a minimum of one reference per week in the first months of 2002 about the relationship. Another favorite by Leno and Letterman involved the incident in January 2002 when President Bush choked on a pretzel while watching football on television. This accident offered many possibilities for humor, most relying on the President’s perceived lack of intellect. Jay Leno provided a reason why the incident did not kill President Bush: “A doctor on TV today said the
reason this happened to President Bush is because he has lower than average blood pressure. Can’t this guy ace one test in his life? All his numbers are lower than average” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/18/02).

The telling of this joke seems to belie the contention that the President’s intellect was an inappropriate target for humor, as was frequently noted in the first month after September 11. Leno stated on his show on February 11: “It does change. . . . I don’t know how many President Bush ‘subliminable’ jokes I did. For weeks, it was like, he’s always gonna flub a word or something. Now, when I see him speak from his heart, at Ground Zero, or whatever, those things all seem to have disappeared” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/12/02). Leno’s low blood pressure joke and this comment about President Bush seem to contradict each other: Leno said Bush was off-limits, but he made the President a target of late night humor. Jokes about President Bush were made alongside avowals of respect for him, marking a transitional phase for the nation and topical humorists alike.

But the hesitancy of producers and receivers of topical humor to fully re-engage in ridicule of the President and his policies slowly began to fade away, as evidenced at the end of January 2002. Leno made a comment that connected Enron and Iraq: “The big rumor going around is, we may begin bombing Iraq. Or, as the White House calls it, ‘Operation Keep Enron Off the Front Page’” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/30/02). President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address on January 29 referred to Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil,” but a joint resolution from Congress authorizing the use of force against Iraq was not signed until early October of 2002. Suggesting that a new war would divert attention from a recent corporate scandal was only a hypothetical at the time Leno made this observation, and the apparent timing of this military strike was called into question. Leno does not address any other comments to the
Iraq situation during this time period, making this particular observation novel. The notion that the United States would invade Iraq seemed ludicrous and worthy of ridicule in January of 2002. While it is one of the few examples of Leno mocking a White House policy during this time period, it does indicate that the nation was slowly leaving behind the cautious phase of extreme emotions and beginning to accept a changing world, a shift in attitude reflected topical humor engaging in critiques of current events.

One of the changes taking place in the nation involved airline security, and both Letterman and Leno offered many observations about the state of airport and airline security, most in response to reports about x-ray machines not being turned on, security screeners falling asleep on the job or being overly zealous in their patting down of airline passengers, and a general ineptitude of new security measures. September 11 exposed a national vulnerability in airline travel and many people were terrified to use airplanes. The line of jokes about this problem made by Leno and Letterman helped to put these fears into a comic perspective, which functioned to reflect and inspire tolerance, if not resignation, concerning the new security routines at national airports.

The color-coding system created to indicate the level of terror warnings in the United States served as the focus of many jokes, and is another example of topical humor reflecting the nation’s acceptance concerning changes taking place in national security. Jay Leno commented: “Tom Ridge has set up a five stage, color coded system to warn Americans against threats. The colors are green, blue, yellow, orange and red. This is what the Republicans meant when they said they are trying to get more color in the party” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 03/14/02). “Saturday Night Live” spoofed this policy on its March 16, 2002 episode by having “Tom Ridge” describe the colors as follows: “the lowest level condition is off-white, followed by
cream, putty, bone and finally, natural . . . For those of you who may have any questions, an excellent guide can be found on page 74 of the newest J. Crew catalog” (Saturday Night Live, 03/16/02). And before Easter, David Letterman told his audience: “Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge has issued another alert. This Sunday, Americans should be on the lookout for brightly colored hidden eggs” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 03/27/02).

The Office of Homeland Security introduced the color-coding system to the public on March 12, 2002. The above instances of humor were presented within days of this unveiling, with the exception of Letterman’s comment, which connected the colored warning codes with the soon to come Easter holiday. The Advisory System became a target for humor because of the absurdity that properly identifying a color that corresponds to a terror threat can prevent a future attack. “Saturday Night Live” notes how the system is more fear-inducing than preventive by noting that the lowest level “indicates a huge risk of a terrorist attack. Next highest . . . indicates an immense risk of a terrorist attack” (Saturday Night Live, 03/16/02). The levels escalate to include “enormous risk” and “gigantic risk,” indicating that neither color nor language can protect the country from another attack (Saturday Night Live, 03/16/02).14

These jokes about the Advisory System call into question the ability of the federal government, specifically the Office of Homeland Security, to prevent another terrorist attack in the future. Merely identifying an increased risk does not ensure that plans similar to 9/11 will be thwarted. Indeed, most individuals likely assumed that the country was on “severe risk” after only recently being subjected to hijackers flying domestic airplanes into buildings in the United States.

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14 The actual levels range from “low risk of terrorist attacks” (green) to “general risk” (blue), “significant risk” (yellow), “high risk” (orange), and “severe risk” (red). While “Saturday Night Live” uses hyperbole to mock both the choice of colors and use of language, even the lowest risk identified by the Advisory System acknowledges that an attack may occur. However, the U.S. has been at the elevated level or “significant risk” (yellow) for the majority of its existence, only being raised to the high risk (orange) level a few times.
States. Regardless of what intelligence agencies perceived to be the threat level against the country, most citizens wanted consistently heightened awareness and security measures due to the catastrophic breach of national safety that occurred on September 11, 2001.

Leno, Letterman and “Saturday Night Live’s” focus on the Homeland Security Advisory System casts collective judgment not only on the creation of the system itself, but also on its future efficacy to prevent attacks. This is indicative of humor’s ability to address temporality on multiple levels: the past (9/11), present (creation of the color-coding), and future (potential attacks). Thus, while the focus of most topical humor is current events, past and future events are often referenced in these examples. More importantly, these jokes about the Advisory System illustrate the arbitrary nature of terrorism. The Onion conveyed national helplessness in its initial edition after 9/11, but topical humor does more than acknowledge the uncontrolled contingency of modernity. Rather, mocking the ability of the national government to protect the nation from future attacks encourages tolerance of a changed reality because such mocking was common in topical humor before the events of 9/11.

Immediately after the attacks, despair and confusion combined with fear and anger that crowded out other events or matters of importance in daily living. However, as time passed, individuals realized that time did not stop. Attitudes and actions had to change in response to the attacks of 9/11. Topical humor reflected and facilitated this adaptation both by noting the measures taken to lessen the threats of future attacks and by mocking these efforts as being ineffectual. Making fun of airline security and the color-coded advisory system helped foster acceptance of these changes because it forced a catharsis of anxiety and fear that emerged in response to the attacks of 9/11. This process of catharsis occurs in both tragedy and comedy, but humor relating to a tragedy offers particular insight into comedic purgation.
Dana Sutton notes that humor can provide a catharsis “when the object of laughter” is the same or close to the “bad feelings being purged” (Sutton 1994, 42). Sutton uses Aristotle’s tragic catharsis as a foundation from which to build her theory, and fuses this with Freud’s concept that humor is a release from societal taboos. Asserting that humor is both intellectual and psychological, Aristotelian and Freudian, intellectual and emotional, Sutton outlines a process of purgation stemming from humor that provides a catharsis in the audience. Her theory is this: a humorist selects a comic surrogate that resembles a target capable of evoking negative feelings in the audience. These negative feelings can be anxiety, fear, sexual aggression and hostility – emotions that are a combination of Aristotle’s tragic catharsis and Freudian social taboos (Sutton 1994).

The purgation process occurs on two levels, similar to other dualities found in topical humor. The first occurs when an audience recognizes the negative emotion being purged by the surrogate, provoking laughter and a sense of pleasure due to the fact that one or more of the four negative emotions is built up and then released. The second, deeper level of purgation occurs when audience members recognize that the surrogate represents an actual target in real life, and this transference allows for not only purgation of the negative emotion, but also an educational experience with the potential for inoculation against the target provoking bad feelings in the future (Sutton 1994).

Sutton outlines the process of invention undertaken by topical humorists as one that locates “the topics that are likely to produce bad feelings in their audience” (Sutton 1994, 49) and then use them as the bases for jokes. That the pool of topics is also contemporary makes the “bad feelings” even stronger, as they are more immediate in a temporal sense. The Advisory System works well to help purge negative feelings because it symbolizes terrorist attacks that
may take place in the future, as well as those that already took place. Fears over the past attack of 9/11, as well as potential future attacks, are transferred to the Advisory System in the above jokes, which serves as the target. By laughing at the ineffectual Advisory System, we release fears about terrorism because they have been reduced to a target made to appear ridiculous due to its inability to protect the nation by the identification of various colors. Additionally, laughing at color-coding may prompt individuals to think about why the Advisory System was thought to be effective and a valuable use of taxpayer money. This is the second transference alluded to by Sutton and occurs when the hearer identifies the surrogate and the target, causing an analysis of the joke that lasts beyond the laughter it provokes. Sutton claims that there can be “long term or even permanent alteration in the spectator’s thoughts and feelings” (Sutton 1994, 81), which is an argument that mirrors Powell and Nitz’s contentions that satire and late night television, respectively, can affect audiences well beyond an initial exposure to specific examples of these discourses.

The possibility for dual transference – cathartic release and education – to occur in topical comedy is possible because of the comic vision’s inherent duality to encompass tragedy and comedy as well as intellect and emotion. But dual transference from a catharsis is heightened because of topical humor’s reliance on recent events and the comedic conspiracy that exists among producers and receivers. Most people have some general awareness of topics in the news and this knowledge affords greater insight into jokes about current events. Moreover, stories relating to September 11 were a special subset of news stories most people paid particular attention to given the shock and fear felt in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Any news about and relating to the attacks would be a source of bad feelings in late 2001 continuing into 2002. News items relating to 9/11 served as a major source of invention for comedians, helping to bring about
a comic catharsis in their audience members. This purgation served to signal and advance a transition in the nation’s attitude, and topical humorists continued to help audiences express and transfer their feelings from anger to tolerance in the first months of 2002.

**Casuistically Stretching Toward Acceptance on “Saturday Night Live”**

The first “Saturday Night Live” broadcast in 2002 ran a cartoon episode of “TV Funhouse” that depicted former Presidents Reagan, Bush, Carter, Ford and Clinton as superheroes getting ready to search for Osama bin Laden. They begin to blame one another for allowing bin Laden to attack the United States. President Reagan was the most vocal and he blamed the first President Bush for backing a soft foreign policy that was “gayer than a Cher impersonator,” as well as his involvement in training bin Laden against the Soviets ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 01/12/02). Reagan also blamed Clinton for being too concerned with “fat girls” to find bin Laden, while President Carter wet his pants at the very idea of having to hunt down bin Laden himself. The cartoon ends with this jingle:

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War brings people together.
War brings people together.
Black or white, yellow or red
We all want to see the same guy dead!
War brings people together (except Jerry Falwell)
War brings people together (brothers and sisters).
("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 01/12/02).
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This cartoon depicts former presidents arguing over Osama bin Laden, indicating that each failed to minimize the danger posed by bin Laden, especially former President Bush who gave him military training. This implicates past leaders in the current war on terror, and further complicates the relationship between both Presidents Bush that The Onion and “Saturday Night Live” probed in 2001. The final song serves to unite these former presidents, intimating that war is a unifying endeavor. Jerry Falwell is left out of this unity, perhaps because he blamed
feminists and homosexuals for encouraging an attack on the United States. Falwell’s internal
critique of the country is contrasted with the identification of an external enemy, Osama bin
Laden. This works to establish bin Laden as a target worthy of military retaliation, an enemy
that everyone can hate. Falwell is isolated and mocked, thus becoming a new target for the
nation’s anger that had previously been focused upon bin Laden. This is similar to Leno and
Letterman’s casting of Kenneth Lay as another new enemy, one worthy of public attention and
ridicule.

Another “Saturday Night Live” skit referenced the Enron scandal. On the March 2, 2002
show, Will Ferrell performed an impersonation of President George W. Bush giving a speech
about the axis of evil, which originally included Iraq, Iran and North Korea:

> But my axis of evil doesn’t seem to interest some people out there. Some people just want to talk about the economy and budgets and Enron. I bet most of you out there don’t even understand Enron. I sure as heck don’t. It hurts my head to think about. So from now on, Enron will be part of my axis of evil. I don’t want to hear anything else about Enron unless our military has pounded it into submission . . . . So is the economy. I don’t like the way this economy is acting – not very American. It’s evil. The economy is now part of my axis of evil. Also, I don’t like Senator Tom Daschle. You know why? He’s very critical . . . . So quick recap – that’s Iran, Iraq, Enron, the economy, and Daschle and one of those Koreas . . . . And don’t forget France. The French don’t like me saying axis of evil. So guess what? They’re now part of the very axis of evil they don’t like me saying . . . . You mess with Texas and it’s straight to the axis of evil . . . . Here’s one you probably didn’t expect. Dick Cheney. He’s up to something and I don’t like it. He’s never around . . . . He’s very sneaking [sic]. Not to mention scary (Saturday Night Live, 03/02/02).

Rather than speculate on what was or might be said by George W. Bush, Ferrell embodies the
president and mimics his style of speech and gestures. The impersonation adds an additional
layer to presidential mockery because his faults are performed rather than simply mentioned.
In addition to the physical parody, the speech also mimics assumed attitudes held by President Bush. He is confused by Enron, which gives him a headache, perpetuating the stereotype that the president is not very intelligent. This characteristic is referenced again when the President fails to know which Korea was originally included in the axis of evil. The “solution” for this corporate scandal is to bomb it out of existence, similar to Leno’s comment that predicted Iraq would be bombed to make us forget about Enron. In both cases, the President is seen as being quick to engage in military action, calling into question why other options are not fully explored. Beyond the potential for this to serve as a critique against rushing into war, there is a more obvious jest being made about the “axis of evil” first introduced by President Bush in the 2002 State of the Union address. Adding in other countries because they don’t like the phrase, the economy for under-performing, a leader of the opposing party, and his own Vice President reduces the concept of an axis of evil to utter absurdity.

Extending the axis of evil to include everything or everyone that “messes with Texas” or makes President Bush uncomfortable is an example of what Kenneth Burke calls “casuistic stretching, [which is when] one introduces new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles” (Burke [1937] 1984, 229). This parody of Bush suggests that there was a level of capriciousness when the axis of evil was first defined, and further intimates that it can expand exponentially depending upon how the president feels about individuals, events or countries. The ultimate power required to make such a designation is made clear, which serves to problematize unquestioned authority during a time of war. Ferrell confronts the audience with an imagined slippery slope of logic. Such an ever-expanding axis of evil, as determined by a man who is easily confused, comes across as both amusing and scary.
Expectations for Will Ferrell’s parody of the President were high in 2002. Indeed, there was much speculation about whether or not Ferrell would reprise this role after September 11. The physical and verbal characteristics were on point and offered entertainment, but the content also offers information and a critique about presidential logic. The creation of an axis of evil is made ridiculous through casuistic stretching, which functions as a critique of the original selection of countries included within the axis. By providing reasons for including Enron, France and Dick Cheney, audience members may begin to wonder why Iraq, Iran and North Korea were chosen initially. Any future references to the axis of evil would remind those who saw this parody of humorous reasons behind President Bush’s selection criterion, which may influence negative responses to use of the term “axis of evil.” Such reactions would be consistent with Powell’s dual responses to satire noted above.

With respect to Sutton’s catharsis, the surrogate for humor in this example is Will Ferrell and his impersonation of President Bush. Obviously, the target of the humor is the “real” President Bush and his questionable intelligence. When audience members are exposed to the “axis of evil” in traditional news stories, they would recall Ferrell’s rambling stream of consciousness logic, perhaps laughing at the recollection and enabling a cathartic release of negative emotions concerning the trajectory of international relations. But a second transference, this one educational, is also possible if individuals also reflect on the actual reasons behind the creation of the “axis of evil.” Will Ferrell’s impersonation of President Bush and his ridiculous discussion of the “axis of evil” thus potentially affects audiences beyond a single exposure to this skit on “Saturday Night Live.”

This parody of the President mocks not only physical and mental stereotypes of the national leader, but also his policies. By ridiculing how countries were selected for the “axis of
evil,” fear and anxiety over possible actions by these “rogue” nations is lessened. In Sutton’s cathartic process, audiences would purge their negative feelings over potential threats by laughing at the President’s jumbled thought process. Bad feelings exist because of fears concerning future attacks; however, similar to jokes about color-coded advisory warnings, audiences are helped to accept the fact that the world now includes the possibility of terrorist activities that cannot always be prevented. Providing audiences with a target for laughter, as well as providing initial critiques about the direction of the nation in a new age of terrorism, all help to engender acceptance of a post-9/11 world. Indeed, the very act of joking about significant changes in domestic and international policies marks that acceptance of 9/11 is beginning to take place in the United States.

Casuistically Stretching Towards Acceptance in The Onion

Due to their common reliance on current events, it is not surprising that The Onion takes on issues similar to those addressed by Leno, Letterman and “Saturday Night Live.” However, this satirical newspaper explicitly notes what is only implied in the other shows that I have previously discussed: September 11. In the January 16, 2002 edition, the top story is, “Area Man Not Exactly Sure When to Take Down American Flags” (The Onion 2002, 38:01). Utica, NY resident Jerry Wenger is the area man at issue, and he asked: “Do I have to wait until all the troops are home? Because that could take years. I’m not trying to be a jerk – I’m just not sure when to consider this whole thing over” (The Onion 2002, 38:01). Wenger displayed a total of six flags on his car, home, garage, body, and at work after September 11, even though he had never owned “Old Glory” before the attacks. What prevented Wenger from simply taking them all down was peer pressure from neighbors and co-workers, who responded that the flags should
stay displayed “until injustice is eradicated around the world and God’s peace prevails” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:01).

Wenger hoped to replace the flags with Christmas decorations, but neighbors used red, white and blue lights and plastic decorations adorned with more versions of the Stars and Stripes, making him uncomfortable and unwilling to be the first to take down any displays of patriotism. The first casualty of the war occurred on January 4, which prevented Wenger from taking down the flags at that time. Making a comparison to World War II, Wenger observed: “They say Sept. 11 was the current generation’s Pearl Harbor, and I believe that. But World War II ended with an official surrender and peace treaty, so everybody knew exactly when they could take their flags down” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:01). A similar resolution to the war on terror seems unlikely. This article focused upon individual responses to the terrorist attacks and what future actions should be taken. The subject of whether or not to take down U.S. flags may seem an incredibly simplistic problem now, but there was an explosion of patriotic displays after 9/11 and Wenger articulates the shared confusion about not simply when to stop putting up flags, but what will bring about the official end of the open-ended war on terror. Wenger also conveys a willingness to accept the events of 9/11 and to move on with his life in all respects, including house and auto decorations.

*The Onion* also explicitly noted the attacks of September 11 on January 30, 2002 in an info-graphic titled, “Super Bowl Halftime Shows,” which described various productions from 1967 to 2002. The current show was described: “America rocks out with some crazy halftime action but is also solemn and dignified as it honors the heroes of September 11 while still maintaining a loose, fun, party spirit, which is part of what our troops overseas are so bravely defending” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:03). This highlights how awkward it was to strike a balance
between sports’ entertainment and the proper respect for the United States military troops located in Afghanistan after the attacks of 9/11. The sentence is absurd, which accurately describes the tenuous battle between returning to “normal” and maintaining a state of solemnity over those who died and will die as a result of the terrorist attacks, a tension that existed during this transitional period of acceptance.

The jokes and humorous skits I have focused on so far all relate to September 11 (e.g. Osama bin Laden, color-coded Advisory System), but *The Onion* is the only source that explicitly references the attacks themselves. This likely stems from the overwhelmingly positive reception of *The Onion* dated September 27, 2001 that dealt with the attacks (Doniger 2001; Kurtzman 2002; Salkowski 2001). The positive ethos afforded to this publication in matters dealing with 9/11 carried over into 2002, which allowed the satirical weekly more leeway to clearly articulate how the nation was faring in the wake of the terrorist acts. The late September 2001 edition also created expectations for *The Onion* to articulate the unsaid during this time of crisis and recovery, and they continued to make explicit references to 9/11 within stories in the early part of 2002.

Following up on the Enron scandal, the February 20, 2002 edition of *The Onion* featured the top story: “Americans Would Be Outraged If They Understood Enron Collapse” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:06). The article reports: “Though many Bush Administration appointees are former Enron executives or business associates, Congress is not being flooded with letters from outraged Americans demanding an investigation into what the White House knew about the energy giant’s illegal and illicit activities” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:06). Further, the article notes: “the mass public silence grew even quieter following reports that Enron has contributed $572,350 to various George W. Bush election campaigns over the course of his political career” (*The Onion* 2002,
This story overtly connects President Bush and his administration with the collapse of Enron.

The use of irony in this article functions as an “evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t, as well as in [irony’s] targets and in what some people call [irony’s] ‘victims’” (Hutcheon 1995, 2). Irony, in this sense, functions in a similar manner to the way in which topical humor creates a conspiratorial relationship among producers and receivers by dividing those who are mocked from those who engage in the mocking. But irony is different because it also has a critical edge that overtly mocks its “victims” while simultaneously congratulating everyone who agrees that these targets are the proper objects of ridicule. In this article, the people oblivious to the harm that the Enron collapse will cause the nation are mocked, and it is intimated that that this scandal is being downplayed because of the company’s political contributions to the President.

The article also provided reactions from average people, like Teresa Conreid, a legal secretary in Athens, Georgia: “What are you asking me for? Between terrorism, the economy, and my own personal life, I’ve got enough problems. I think we all have more important things to worry about than politicians rolling over for giant corporate interests at the expense of voters who elected them” (The Onion 2002, 38:06). Ms. Conreid’s comment uses irony to make a point similar to that made in comments by Leno and skits on “Saturday Night Live:” Americans will not notice the Enron scandal because of other matters, such as terrorism, the poor economy and personal issues. The article ironically notes that if the United States does not pay attention to Enron, the problem will simply go away. The highest levels of government are implicated as being players in this scandal, but there is also blame laid at the feet of Americans too distracted
by other things, perhaps the maintenance of flags on their property, to concern themselves with Enron.

_The Onion’s_ February 20, 2002 edition also had a feature on Bush’s “axis of evil” in the recurrent “What do you think?” segment, which displays photos of average people and their comments on recent news stories. The question in this edition asked: “President Bush’s State of the Union pronouncement that North Korea, Iran, and Iraq represent an ‘Axis of Evil’ continues to spark debate. What do you think?” (_The Onion_ 2002, 38:06). Comments included: “These ‘Axis of Evil’ nations are no more a threat than Libya, Syria, Cuba, Egypt, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, or the Sudan. We’ve got nothing to worry about;” “Calling Iran part of an ‘Axis of Evil’ may cause average Americans to lump moderates like Mohammad Khatami in with extremists like Ali Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjami;” and, “Aw, shit, not another axis. That last one kicked our asses” (_The Onion_ 2002, 38:06).

These responses range from the well-informed to the semi-informed, which is in stark contrast to the citizen quoted in the “Enron” article just discussed. Even the person who used obscenity was able to remember that the phrase “axis” had been used in the past to refer to enemies, while another individual easily came up with eight other countries that are potential threats to the nation, and another was able to differentiate political leanings among Iranian politicians. Most people were not that knowledgeable about history or other countries’ politics and their potential danger to us, but this segment allows readers to learn from other “average” Americans.

These responses were mixed in with three other comments that mistook the phrase to relate to Evel Knievel, a suggestion to drop food on these countries that we just angered by calling them evil, and a final comment to settle this conflict in a pro-wrestling ring rather than on
a battlefield. Each response represents an individual with a different degree of knowledge, although the one with insight into Iranian politics noted above is by far the most sophisticated. This segment serves an informative purpose about international relations in a very humorous and unthreatening way, allowing for the distribution of knowledge and potentially allowing for an attitude change in readers.

Similar to the way that “Saturday Night Live” poked fun at the President in his creation of the axis of evil, The Onion ran a short article on February 27, 2002 with the headline, “$5 Million Bounty Placed On Recession” with a comment made by “President Bush:” “This recession may run its course, but it cannot hide. We will find you, and we will end you” (The Onion 2002, 38:07). Both examples of humor play with the stereotype that George Bush is a cowboy ready to fight any enemy – even the economy – at high noon. This stems from the use of phrases like “smoke ‘em out” that Bush used in reference to the terrorists, but it also is an exaggeration of his tough guy stance, not to mention the futility of placing a bounty in order to improve the economy. Texas cowboy tactics are ineffectual against certain national problems, an economic downturn being one of them. This is also similar to Leno and “Saturday Night Live’s” jokes that make the President appear quick to use military tactics.

Given the extended format of written satire compared to late night talk show monologues, The Onion is a potent source for both memory provocation and new information. For example, the headline, “Military Promises ‘Huge Numbers’ For Gulf War II: The Vengeance” (The Onion 2002, 38:07) immediately contextualizes the potential war with Iraq as a “sequel” and plays upon the assumptions relied upon in other examples of topical humor that President Bush prefers military action to diplomacy. “Donald Rumsfeld” is quoted on the sequel: “In the original, as you no doubt know, we defeat Saddam Hussein, only to let him slip away at the very end. This
time, we’re going back in to take out the trash” (The Onion 2002, 38:07). Presenting a second war with Iraq as an action movie sequel has obvious satiric overtones, but also reminds audiences about the first Iraqi war in addition to providing additional details about this previous war.

The actual facts involving the first war and a potential second war with Iraq is presented as the plotline for a summer movie blockbuster. For example, one of the characters is described as: “[T]he son of one of the key characters in the first one, back then just a boy, is now all grown up and ready to take his rightful place at the head of the alliance” (The Onion 2002, 38:07), accompanied by a “photo” of George W. Bush in a camouflage uniform carrying a rifle with Iraqi citizens standing behind him. Saddam Hussein is back because: “He’s the perfect villain; ruthless, efficient, and sinister. It would be an affront to all the fans not to include him” (The Onion 2002, 38:07). The style of this article is similar to the marketing used for multiple episode movies like “Star Wars” or “Lord of the Rings,” the major difference being that The Onion is discussing a war and not a series of movies.

The incongruity of juxtaposing a war and a movie is addressed a few times in the article: “In the 11 years since the original Gulf War, few conflicts have come close to matching the level of support and press attention generated by that operation;” “We were disappointed by our numbers in Bosnia,’ Rumsfeld said, ‘That particular conflict played primarily to an art-house crowd. Your mainstream audiences didn’t connect with the complexities of the centuries-old ethnic clash you had going on there. But this time, we feel we’ve got something very accessible that will play in Peoria. I mean, how can you go wrong with an ‘Axis of Evil’?”; and “There’s no reason this can’t be a franchise for us like those wars with Germany or the Communists used
to be,’ Rumsfeld said. ‘The public loves it, the soldiers love it, the media love it.’” (The Onion 2002, 38:07).

The central idea conveyed by these quotes from “Rumsfeld” is that there has to be public support in order for this war “sequel” to be successful. This is also true with respect to a movie’s success, and The Onion forges a connection between these two seemingly inconsistent events (movies and war) by providing what Burke terms a “perspective by incongruity.” The connection between war and the movies in this article is a marketing strategy. A common element for both a movie and war is the budget, and readers are reminded that the budget for “the first Gulf War” was “$61 billion,” while “[t]he budget for Gulf War II: The Vengeance is somewhere in the neighborhood of $84 billion . . . and every penny of it is up there on your screen” (The Onion 2002, 38:07). Not only are incongruities both presented and breached, but readers are also reminded of how much the Gulf War cost and are provided with financial projections regarding a second invasion with Iraq.

Equating movies and wars may be interpreted as a means of minimizing the importance of the latter. However, The Onion uses a tactic similar to that employed by Leno, Letterman and “Saturday Night Live” by both inflating a topic (e.g. Miss Cleo’s criminal investigation) and simultaneously deflating another (e.g. the search for Osama bin Laden). Viewing government discourse as a marketing campaign geared toward garnering public support rather than an unbiased source of information fosters a skeptical view of the second war in Iraq and how it is being presented to the U.S. public. Specifically, The Onion notes: “In addition to a major PR push, Gulf War II will be accompanied by a major merchandising campaign. The Pentagon has secured the commitment of Topps for a series of cards supporting the effort. It has also brokered a first-look deal with CNN, guaranteeing the network full access to the front lines, as well as first
crack at interviewing the men and women behind the scenes” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:07).

While these statements may seem totally farfetched, there is truth at their core, an element required for any good satire.

In fact, Topps actually did create a series of cards entitled “Enduring Freedom” in 2001, which depicted Osama bin Laden as one card, with the rest of the set devoted to those people helping in the United States anti-terror effort. To those readers with knowledge of these cards, the notion that the Pentagon would sanction a series of cards appears more likely than ridiculous. Further, the notion of allowing privileged access to a particular media network is not beyond the realm of possibility, as coverage of U.S. military actions post-Vietnam was frequently limited. Indeed, when restrictions were placed on reporters during the Persian Gulf War (“Gulf War I”), many journalists and their media outlets claimed that the censorship stemmed from “the military’s desire to get even with the press for besmirching the military’s reputation in Vietnam” (Blanchard 1992, 6). Thus, protecting the military from negative press coverage by awarding privileged access to one network may not be such a farfetched notion.

*The Onion* article provides a reminder of the first war in Iraq, as well as its budget. Further, by predicting what will happen in this second Iraqi military conflict, as well as what it might cost (more than the first one), future events are predicted which potentially provoke a present state of worry and concern over the trajectory of the ongoing war on terror. Satire relies on a central core of truth that is then extended to hyperbolic extremes, exposing a reasonable middle ground that emerges through the ridicule of radical positions. In this case, the central truth is that movies and wars require public support – both monetary and attitudinal. This similarity, coupled with specifics that have actually occurred (like the Topps’ cards and military budgets), blurs the line between entertainment and military actions. The middle ground that
emerges is that military actions should not be marketed like movies, replete with merchandise, or covered by only one news network.

*The Onion* is able to present longer works of satire than late night television, but it is similar to “Saturday Night Live” because both simulate reality through a parody of the news media itself. “Saturday Night Live” has actors parody politicians like Bush or Cheney and also produces a mock news show, and *The Onion* creates stories that contain “quotes” and “facts” from real individuals, both of which make the articles appear similar to those found in traditional newspapers. The opportunity to present more information, whether as a lead-up to the punch line or as the substance of humor itself, educates audiences about the underlying issues involved in a particular topic. By providing such information from the past or with respect to current action and its impact on the future, audiences are helped to contextualize current events, a process that is required to establish a bridge between extreme emotions and adaptation, also known as the acceptance phase.

Some of the examples provided above illustrate how *The Onion* educates readers through details relating to international politics, national corporate scandals, or mock polls of individuals meant to represent and reflect average citizens. Providing information about current events within a satiric frame allows for readers to learn something, albeit in an entertaining way. This process is more memorable than obtaining information from another less humorous source, as noted by Powell, Nitz and in classical rhetorical handbooks. *The Onion's* use of satire also helps to instill acceptance of the events of 9/11 by portraying extreme attitudes, such as knee-jerk patriotism, obliviousness to the gravity of corporate scandals, or an over-eagerness for war, as being ridiculous and worthy of public mocking. A continued purgation of negative feelings, such as anger and fear, also helps readers to tolerate the changes that have taken place post-9/11.
and/or minimize fears about these changes, an indication that the country and its citizens had
indeed survived.

**Conclusion: Accepting Ridicule and 9/11**

Just as topical humor helped the nation to acknowledge and express extreme emotions
that came about in the wake of 9/11, it also reflected and encouraged acceptance of the fact that
the terrorist attacks had occurred. Placing bin Laden next to less threatening events, such as the
football season or a network anchor war, served to minimize the fear and anxiety felt about the
mastermind of 9/11. Leno and Letterman’s comparisons between Kenneth Lay, the rogue CEO
of Enron, and bin Laden elevated the threat level stemming from a white-collar criminal, a
heightening also reflected in *The Onion*. In each case, bin Laden was made more familiar
because of similarities to more well-known people or events. Essentially, bin Laden was
relegated to the status of just another news story, which indicated and facilitated that the nation
was beginning to tolerate the attacks and that the mastermind of same was missing.

Topical humor’s reliance on satire, in a fully developed form such as “Saturday Night
Live” and *The Onion* or in the abbreviated format used by Leno and Letterman, makes people
and events appear ridiculous. Satire exposes the middle ground of a controversy to the audience,
positions readily discerned when compared to the extreme positions subjected to ridicule. This
encourages negative responses to subsequent radical discourses due to the high credibility
afforded to topical humorists and the influential potential of topical humor. Finally, a special
relationship exists among producers and receivers of humor because both participate in the
creation of meaning. This relationship furthers the persuasive nature of topical humor. A
conspiratorial relationship exists among those who choose and agree on topics of ridicule as
opposed to those who are subjected to the mocking. Due to these factors, seemingly disparate
jokes made at the expense of both bin Laden and the President likely resonated in audiences for Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and *The Onion*.

Topical humor encourages agreement on the appropriate targets of ridicule through its conspiratorial nature, making this genre well-suited to locate when the nation transitioned from a state of negative emotions to one of tolerance. The act of parodying the President of the United States is a symbolic act of normalcy, indicating that the nation was ready to return to mocking people in positions of power. Critical thinking about past, current and future events occurs when ridicule is focused on international policies or national security. Such cognitive functioning indicates a shift in the balance of intellect and emotion in humor from the previous anger phase. Emotions were privileged in the fragile months after 9/11, but intellect began to infuse topical humor again in 2002. According to Dana Sutton, it is the combination of cognitive and affective elements that allows topical humorists to use surrogates in their humor, providing both catharsis and satisfaction in audiences who recognize the targets of ridicule (e.g. President Bush, future terrorist attacks).

While topical humor reflected the nation’s tolerance of the 9/11 attacks, I do not conceive of this as blind acceptance. Placing bin Laden and the threat of terrorism into context with other current events helped these new threats to appear less epochal when compared to other ongoing occurrences. This is one example of how topical humor reflected and encouraged acceptance of 9/11: the attacks did occur, but the world did not stop. The nation was allowed time to grieve and be angry, but we had to move on lest other tragic events cause more havoc on a country distracted by the specter of September 11. Topical humor about the Enron scandal appealed to this kind of sentiment.
Acceptance was signaled in another way that did not involve making the terrorist threat a part of everyday life. Returning to the practice of mocking the President and government policies reflects tolerance of the changes taking place in the nation. But this ridicule was not merely an exercise in entertainment. Mocking Bush administration policies forced an awareness of past and potential future harm of any ill-conceived strategies in the war on terror, as shown by examples from “Saturday Night Live,” *The Onion*, and Jay Leno. Invading Iraq emerged as a subject for topical humor in early 2002. The potential war was cast as a red herring used to distract the nation from both the unsuccessful search for bin Laden and the Enron scandal. Within the context of current events in the first four months of 2002, invading Iraq seemed a plan worthy of ridicule.\(^{15}\)

Acceptance of tragic events is a transitory phase, with elements of both anger and acceptance found within some of the examples of topical humor discussed herein. Anger is directed at Kenneth Lay and Jerry Falwell, in addition to Osama bin Laden. Additionally, critiques concerning the war on terror begin to emerge. The tactics of purging anger and engaging in critiques help encourage tolerance towards the events of 9/11. While critiques were slow to emerge, the adaptation stage marks a return to business as usual for producers and receivers of topical humor, a business that includes negotiating national values and informing discussions in the public sphere.

\(^{15}\) Once the war began, jokes about the invasion of Iraq essentially disappeared. This speaks to the importance of temporality/timing in topical humor. There are different objects of ridicule for an ongoing war (e.g. national enemies, cultural difference) than a potential war (e.g. faulty policies). This stems from a belief that jokes about an ongoing war are viewed as insulting to or a betrayal of the voluntary military. Again, Bill Maher’s ill-received comment about cowardice is instructive in this regard.
CHAPTER 4

ADAPTING TO 9/11:
TOPICAL HUMOR AS EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

It is often said that the events of September 11, 2001 changed the world (at least the United States) forever. But we were also urged to get back to “normal” by shopping, going to work and traveling, among other activities. Enjoying popular entertainment is also a part of normal life for most U.S. citizens, and the production and consumption of comedy without questioning whether it was appropriate to laugh began to re-emerge slowly after the terrorist attacks. The search for survivors at Ground Zero in New York stopped in May 2002, thus marking the end of recovery efforts and the beginning of a process to memorialize the fallen and re-build for the survivors. This also marked the beginning of the nation entering into a phase of adaptation, the third phase of topical humor relating to a tragic event (Morrow 1987, 182). The term adaptation refers to the process of adjusting to new conditions, surely an apt description of what the United States struggled with after September 11.

The examples of topical humor introduced in this study thus far illustrate how this discourse illuminates the different phases the nation went through after the tragedy of September 11. The United States moved from a state of extreme emotions immediately after the attacks, to a phase of acceptance. Then, beginning in about May of 2002, adaptation to a post-9/11 world could be discerned in the nation. Topical humor’s focus on current events allows for such sensitivity to the nation’s changing emotional climate. Even though topical humor is flexible enough to deal with new events and changing national attitudes, this discourse also has a stable core that consists of shared national values and a common identity. Topical humor relies on
communal principles to ridicule those persons or events worthy of public shame for not living up to these cherished values. As such, topical humor is a form of epideictic discourse.

Aristotle describes epideictic discourse as being a mixture of present, past and future: “The ceremonial orator is, properly speaking, concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time, though they often find it useful also to recall the past and to makes [sic] guesses at the future” (Aristotle 1984, 1358b). This also describes how topical humorists contextualize current events to their audiences. Contemporary people and situations are referenced in connection with historical occurrences and/or potential future actions in a manner that casts blame on contemporary people and events. Topical humorists seek agreement with the audience over these topics of ridicule using both current events and practices, as well as communal values. The standards and values required for epideictic discourse and topical humor were more stable in this final phase of acceptance than the overwhelming emotions and confusion found in the anger and acceptance phases.

The appraisals regarding the proper attitude towards 9/11 that emerged eight months to a year after the attacks were substantively different from those espoused one day to seven months after the attacks. The shock that terrorists struck the U.S. eventually gave way to anger, then to grim acceptance. As tragic as 9/11 was, life in the United States continued. Citizens had to adjust to what was commonly referred to as a “post-September 11 world,” a world that included the reality of the past attack and the threat of future terrorist actions, in addition to the challenges of national security during a global war on terror.

Despite calls from leaders like President Bush and New York Mayor Giuliani, the United States could not immediately return to “normal” after September 11. But a new normalcy was eventually established, and topical humor is a discourse that reflected and facilitated this
adaptation. While negative emotions and confusion had to be carefully negotiated during the eight months after the attacks in order to forge some kind of acceptance, a return to the normal of pre-9/11 proved impossible. But a status quo was eventually reached that required an adjustment to changed international policies and increased levels of national security. Such adaptation was encouraged through topical humor’s use of the comic frame that established a hopeful attitude in audiences, enabling them to re-build a community through appeals to national values.

As the country approached the one-year anniversary of 9/11, topical humor began to rely increasingly upon national values to address how the United States responded to terrorism. This integration of preexisting values and changing attitudes is a hallmark of epideictic discourse, and by extension, topical humor. The difference between the acceptance and adaptation phases is subtle; however, there is a distinction between tolerating the events of 9/11 and adjusting to the changes brought about as a result of the attacks.

Additionally, the adaptation phase allows for a deeper level of conspiracy among its producers and receivers because topical humor could again rely on shared values. Relying on communal principles was inhibited before this time period due to the presence of extreme negative emotions and extreme confusion over how to respond to the attacks. Additionally, the nation was united in the aftermath of the attacks, but this community began to fracture with the passage of time. Topical humor’s reliance on shared beliefs helped to re-unite the nation again, and establishing a community was important in order allow for adaptation and instill the proper attitude toward the changed world.

Evidence of a fractured nation began to emerge in the media during this time period, especially concerning how the U.S. was memorializing the terrorist attacks from one year ago. Heather Havrilesky, a contributor to Salon.com, wrote an article entitled “The Selling of 9/11” in
which she decried the crass commercialism of the tragedy evidenced in products that ranged from “a painted commemorative plate,” to “a coffee table book filled with page after page after page of full-color tragedy,” to the New York Fire Department’s “‘Calendar of Heroes’ – a calendar of heroes with their shirts off, more specifically” (Havrilesky 2002). The consumption of products depicting the tragedy could not truly memorialize, Havrilesky claimed, but rather functioned as a means to help us forget though a fleeting act of consumerism. The critique of both memorialization and consumerism indicates that the nation had adapted to the continued threat of terrorism because we had returned to the practice of social criticism without fear of being labeled unpatriotic or callous.

In addition to the critique of conspicuous consumption as a means to heal from the tragedy of 9/11, media outlets also specifically questioned the kind of events being organized for the one-year anniversary of the attacks. Newsmakers had difficulties; for example ABC News President David Westin commented that the emotions experienced one year ago were brought back to life by creating and producing stories directly related to the attacks (Battaglio 2002). Late night humorists also struggled with how to proceed with anniversary shows, similar to their careful approach to the initial shows after the attacks that were broadcast one year before. Jay Leno decided to go ahead with a new show, but David Letterman was still deciding mid-August about whether to air a show at all. Apparently, Letterman “indicated that he neither wanted to do an original show nor rerun” the broadcast of his first show post-9/11 (Rosenberg 2002).

Other entertainment shows also wanted to participate in memorializing the attacks of 9/11, and Fox’s “American Idol” decided to have the winner of its competition sing the National Anthem at the Lincoln Memorial on September 11, 2002. The tie-in between a reality show and the day-long memorial services planned in Washington, D.C. prompted a Washington Post
television critic to observe sarcastically that this appearance would occur “six days before the first single by the newly minted superstar is released. The terrorists have won” (de Moraes 2002). The intermingling of the terrorist attacks with consumerism, the news media and entertainment evoked responses from many sectors that ranged from uneasy to openly critical, illustrating a return to social criticism and national divisions.

The tragic events of 9/11 interfered with the “normal” function of topical humor: a critique of current events. Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion tentatively began to articulate criticism about the Bush administration’s policies, the media and individual actions earlier, but it was not until the nation approached the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks that topical humor provided a highly critical perspective on current events.

As a means to examine how adaptation was both facilitated and reflected in topical humor produced eight months after 9/11, I examine the texts from Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion as examples of epideictic discourse. I explore how the use of the enthymeme in topical humor makes this discourse a subset of epideictic rhetoric. In order to flesh out the persuasive potential of these texts, I extend the potential for topical humor to influence audience attitudes outlined in Chapter 3 by examining the role of the comedic enthymeme. Allowing receivers to fill in inferential gaps in humorous observations fosters a heightened sense of audience participation. I outline a theory of the comedic enthymeme, and then analyze examples of topical humor produced during this time frame that utilize this rhetorical strategy. Finally, I illustrate how topical humor’s reliance on shared values helped to establish a post-9/11 community capable of adjusting to the changes taking place in the nation.

16 “Saturday Night Live” was on break until October 2002 and so the examples that I use from this show were actually produced more than a year after 9/11.
The Comedic Enthymeme in Topical Humor

Topical humor began to direct more skepticism at current events during this time frame, an indication of the nation’s increased skepticism, with the majority of jokes and parodies relying upon a comedic enthymeme. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle wrote of the enthymeme as one of the two essential forms of rhetorical proof, the other form being examples (Aristotle 1984, 1356 b, 5). He further noted: “Speeches that rely on examples are as persuasive as the other kind, but those which rely on enthymemes excite the louder applause” (Aristotle 1984, 1356b, 5). Aristotle’s contention that enthymemes were better suited than examples to please a crowd applies to topical humor, a discourse that generally seeks to entertain an audience. However, as noted previously, the successful interpretation of an inference increases audience involvement and satisfaction, which increases the persuasive potential of discourse.

Enthymemes are important to both classical orators and contemporary producers of topical humor for the same reasons: connecting with the audience by involving them in the production of discourse and in the creation of meaning. In many cases, comedic enthymemes rely upon audiences to agree upon shared values as a means to complete humorous observations. An example of a comedic enthymeme using this structure would be the numerous jokes that rely upon an assumption that George Bush is an inarticulate buffoon. The office of the President of the United States is the highest elected office in the nation, and as such, the person who holds such a post would ideally be intelligent, articulate and generally a positive representative of and for the people. That President Bush appears to fall short of these ideals makes him an object of ridicule.

The reliance on character traits to condense a humorous message is an important discursive strategy for comedians working in all genres of humor, but it is not the only source.
In analyzing political cartoons from a rhetorical perspective, Martin Medhurst and Michael DeSousa found:

Political commonplaces, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits, and situational factors form the inventional storehouse from which cartoonists draw and from which they construct first order enthymemes which invite the reader to respond in accord with certain values, beliefs, and predispositions. . . . [T]he effectiveness of any given caricature is dependent to a much greater degree on audience ability and participation than on artistic creativity and talent (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981, 204-05).

Medhurst and DeSousa note the diversity of areas from which humorists construct enthymemes and the importance of the audience in properly interpreting these commonplaces. The close connection between invention and reception is certainly a common characteristic for any successful persuasive discourse, a relationship that exists in topical humor.

The commonplaces that Medhurst and DeSousa identify as being conveyed in editorial cartoons are expressed succinctly. Lucy Shelton Caswell also examined editorial cartoons produced within the United States and found that the graphic images conveyed in these images are “opinion-molding and opinion-influencing” because of their relationship to current events and their abbreviated format (Caswell 2004, 14). Topical humor conveys a tremendous amount of information and social context to audiences by using a very few words and in a short amount of time. This is facilitated by the repetition of jokes that require audience completion of comedic enthymemes (e.g. “Bush is dumb”). Indeed, by relying on audiences to fill in certain inferential leaps in logic, the persuasive potential, as well as the level of comedy, is elevated.

Topical humor is entertaining and also encourages audience involvement in the authorship of the discourse through the use of comedic enthymemes. The condensed nature of these skits also infuses them with power. Editorial cartoons often use cultural and racial stereotypes to condense their graphic messages, as this practice allows them to communicate
“complex concepts and identities” quickly (Caswell 2004, 20). While stereotypes are often thought of as perpetuating intolerance or ignorance about minority groups, they also serve to illuminate the existence of these negative attitudes, allowing condensed forms of humor to either victimize or empower, depending upon the content and producer of the joke (Boskin 1997, 155).

These stereotypes are applied not only to groups of people, but also come through in jokes about individuals, like the comedic enthymeme that relies upon George W. Bush as lacking intelligence. Moreover, the humorous shorthand used by editorial cartoonists ultimately stems from “familiar imagery such as American Gothic, the Iwo Jima monument, or something from a current movie. Each requires the reader to have prior knowledge of the metaphor’s source, but the archetypes draw on much deeper emotions to tap into the community’s most fundamental values and beliefs” (Caswell 2004, 19-20). These core cultural values also serve as the basis for the cultural criticisms launched on late night television and in The Onion.

By relying upon shared beliefs to complete comedic enthymemes, as noted by Medhurst, DeSousa and Caswell, the majority of topical humor engages in ridicule as a means to identify and critique individuals for failing to live up to agreed upon national values. As previously discussed, satire generally uses ridicule to identify a middle ground, and the use of comedic enthymemes is another means to establish unity and agreement among an audience. Because of this, topical humor exposes people and events worthy of blame, an exercise in epideictic discourse. According to Caswell, editorial cartoonists are “societal critics” who address “new information that is still being digested (a process they stimulate)” (Caswell 2004, 18; 16). In other words, topical humor helps audiences to interpret current events, but this interpretation is filtered through references to the nation’s values and the knowledge and experiences of the individual audience member. In this manner, humor both reflects and influences social attitudes
and values towards current events, another manner in which topical humor speaks in a double voice.

In an overview of the “New Rhetoric,” Chaim Perelman noted that epideictic rhetoric serves an educational and persuasive purpose, as distinct from literature, because such discourse addresses contemporary issues relevant to society, while literature focuses on matters that are less exigent (Perelman 1979, 6). Epideictic discourse concentrates on matters of pressing social concern just as topical humor uses current events as a source of invention. Ceremonial discourse seeks to persuade an audience regarding the appropriate subjects of praise or blame, and topical humor engages in these appraisals, generally through the application of ridicule to those persons or objects that have behaved in a manner worthy of social censure.

Perelman observed that standards of reasonableness differ across cultures and epochs, and differing concepts of rationality have a strong impact on any processes of argumentation (Perelman 1979, 119). Topical humor’s focus on contemporary issues and its reliance on colloquial language are well suited to allow for adaptation to changes in ideals of reasonableness, just as the nation eventually adapted to the occurrence and reverberations of 9/11. Perelman asserted that reason alone will not influence an audience; rather, “imagination, their interests and passions” must also be called forth in any productive process of argumentation (Perelman 1979, 62). This reference takes into account changing standards of reasonableness, as well as the importance of addressing multiple types of intelligence. Humor’s use of incongruities and clever language – or wit – requires an active imagination so that one can identify and interpret a lack of congruity and/or appreciate a particularly adroit use of words. Imagination and reason are both important elements for the reception and production of both epideictic discourse and topical humor.
In his theoretical examination of laughter, John Morreall determined that reason was a necessary part of humor because without it, audiences could not recognize incongruity, the basis for most adult humor (Morreall 1983, 99). Further, Morreall argues that imagination is a vital component of aesthetic experience generally and humor specifically: “Part of the delight we feel in this use of our imagination is the feeling of liberation it brings. Instead of following well-worn mental paths of attention and thought, we switch to new paths, notice things we didn’t notice before, and countenance possibilities, and even absurdities, as easily as actualities” (Morreall 1983, 90-91). These new paths and possibilities obviously hold great potential for changing the attitudes, beliefs or actions of an audience. Humor both relies upon and influences the use of reason and imagination.

Perelman, with his co-author of *The New Rhetoric*, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, described epideictic rhetoric as “a central part of the art of persuasion” because of its potential to influence “the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 49-50). The authors further theorize about the importance of epideictic rhetoric: “The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement. . . . In epideictic oratory, the speaker turns educator” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 50). Topical humor’s reliance on audience knowledge of national values to complete comedic enthymemes fosters community. This mixture of current events and their relation to national ideals suggests that topical humorists are not only entertainers, but also educators who remind audiences of shared values and encourage actions consistent with these communal principles.
In Burkean terms, David Letterman, Jay Leno, “Saturday Night Live” and *The Onion* are “comic guardians” who “warn individual actors, and the general public, of the doom that awaits those who violate the sacred principles of social order which uphold their community” (Duncan 1968, 98). In other words, these producers of topical humor identify ironic or incongruous gaps in society as a means to call forth individuals to fill in those fissures. This bridging of lapses in society leads to the ultimate goal of the comic frame: transcendence (Burke [1937] 1984, 337). Such transcendence comes through a change in attitude, a change initially prompted by purging negative emotions through humor. But as the nation approached the one-year anniversary of 9/11, topical humor returned to its function as an epideictic discourse that reflects and summons the ideals of national identity within an audience, which brings citizens together. Such a unifying function was not required before this time because patriotism and confusion helped the nation to maintain a cohesive identity. But this unity began to fracture approaching the first anniversary of 9/11.

Topical humor’s reliance on the enthymeme encourages audiences to participate in the creation of meaning by identifying and agreeing upon the proper objects of ridicule, but it also fosters a sense of community. This participation relies on the audience’s shared values and beliefs, both articulated and assumed. Identifying targets worthy of public opprobrium establishes and perpetuates social unity. Casting judgment on contemporary people and practices is an example of epideictic discourse. Topical humor is epideictic because of its use of using current events as a source of invention and by relying upon the audience to complete comedic enthymemes based upon shared national values. This discourse functions as a means to ridicule people or events that fail to live up to these shared ideals or to expose flaws in the principles themselves. Some specific examples of topical humor from eight months after 9/11
should help to illuminate how humor functions as epideictic discourse through the use of comedic enthymemes.

“George Bush is Dumb”: The Epideictic Nature of Comedic Enthymemes

The assumption that George W. Bush has a low level of intellect does not need to be absolutely true in order to make a joke. Indeed, this assumption is likely not true. However, the best jokes rely upon either the potential that they may be true or a central kernel of truth. A critical mass exists of popular texts that, in order to achieve humorous ends, present the President as a bumbling fool. This particular brand of comedy at Bush’s expense was introduced on a national scale during the 2000 election campaign, most notably the parodies of the debates done on “Saturday Night Live” in which the future President Bush demonstrated a marked lack of language proficiency against his opponent’s, then Vice President Gore, stiffness.

The repetition of the “Bush is dumb” joke emerged in many comedic iterations from stand up comics and on late night television. Eventually, the stereotype of President Bush being stupid became an overarching characteristic that defined the President.17 Audiences expected jokes made at the expense of President Bush to rely upon his alleged stupidity in some way. This stereotype functioned as a stock source of invention for comedians, but these jokes also had to make it somehow new and entertaining for the audience. Jokes of this nature employ a comedic enthymeme, which in this case is that the President is stupid. Once this viewpoint is assumed, it becomes an inference that underlies and supports a multitude of jokes, parodies, and innuendoes relating to the President. Thus, “Bush is dumb” becomes the missing inference in comedic enthymemes made about the President.

17 Creating a stereotype of the President is a longstanding tradition in the United States, especially for late night comedy shows. To name just two specific examples, on “Saturday Night Live” Chevy Chase needed only to trip over something to imitate Gerald Ford, while President Clinton continues to be the focus of the majority of Letterman’s jokes relating to sex.
On May 17, Jay Leno made the following comment:

How is this for irony; did you ever think two years ago Bush would be in trouble for something he knew? . . . The White House admitted that President Bush was warned last summer about possible terrorist hijackings. Now Democrats are criticizing him for not seeing the 9/11 attacks coming. You think that is fair? Come on, he was attacked by a pretzel, he didn’t see that coming! . . . I saw an intelligence expert on TV today saying the White House failed to connect the dots. That’s ironic because connecting the dots, that’s Bush’s favorite game ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 05/20/02).

Leno’s specific target in this long rant is George W. Bush, and his audience would be able to complete the comedic enthymeme that President Bush is lacking in intelligence. This particular comedic enthymeme was based upon the irony that the President was in trouble for something he knew. But Leno extends these observations to both reinforce and extend the pre-existing attitude about President Bush’s lack of intellect. Leno connects Bush’s individual ignorance with the recent exposure of a past intelligence failure at the federal level relating to the terrorist attacks. Leno mocks Bush for his dearth of individual intelligence and connects this pre-established assumption to a perceived lack of national intelligence that led to the attacks of 9/11, thereby extending the comedic enthymeme in a new direction. Two meanings of the word intelligence are played against each other: one relates to an individual’s intellect and the other refers to information gathered by national agencies.

Examples that rely upon the comedic enthymeme that President Bush is stupid, and that such ineptitude is worthy of ridicule, illustrate how comedians use personal character traits as sources of invention in creating the “first order enthymemes” noted above by Medhurst and DeSousa. For example, Leno invoked a popular culture reference on April 18, 2002: “Bad news is that it looks like Osama bin Laden is still alive. See, everyone thought he was dead,

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18 This example comes from April 2002 and thus was made during the acceptance phase of humor relating to a tragedy, which indicates that an overlap does occur among these phases due to their transitional nature.
because in the last video he looked like he was near death. He was walking around like a corpse. Then, we turn on the TV and he’s walking around. It’s like Ozzy Osbourne. You think he’s dead, then he’s walking around” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 04/19/02).

In 2002, Ozzy Osbourne and his family starred in a reality television show that frequently depicted Ozzy stumbling about his home. The comparison of bin Laden and Osbourne is comic in its presentation of certain physical similarities, but this statement also leaves something unstated: Ozzy Osbourne’s nickname is the “prince of darkness.” Auditors who have a cultural knowledge about Osbourne that precedes his current reality show will make this connection, but not all will. However, Leno’s joke promotes laughter for those with only a cursory knowledge of contemporary pop culture and allows for another interpretation for those aware of Osbourne’s moniker, in that Leno essentially equates bin Laden with the prince of darkness. In both instances, the observation works by making cultural links between bin Laden and a familiar and popular entertainment figure.

Osama bin Laden was frequently paired with more familiar and less threatening cultural people and events before this adaptation phase as a means to purge anger and allow for acceptance of 9/11 by placing him in a context with other people and events. But details specific to bin Laden also began to be used in topical humor, for example the terrorist’s preferred mode of communication, the videotape. On April 20, “Saturday Night Live” made such a video-related comment during its “Weekend Update” segment: “The Al Jazeera network obtained yet another tape from Osama bin Laden that they aired on Thursday. Oh yeah? Well NBC had back to back “Frasier’s.” Welcome to the big league, guys!”(Saturday Night Live, 04/20/02).19 This observation connects NBC’s network entertainment programming with Al Jazeera’s airing of bin Laden tapes.

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19 This episode of “Saturday Night Live” also included a parody of Ozzy Osbourne, indicating the popularity of Osbourne, as well as illustrating the common topics addressed by these topical comedy shows.
Laden’s videotaped message and thereby trivializes the bin Laden tape, making it seem more “normal” and hence acceptable.

There is a high degree of difference between Al Jazeera, an Arab language news network, and “Frasier,” a situation comedy. A culturally literate viewer of “Saturday Night Live” would also begin to fill in other inferences of this comedic enthymeme that also included “situational factors,” to use Medhurst and DeSousa’s language. For example, the United States government discourages media outlets from broadcasting videos of bin Laden for fear that they may contain hidden messages to other members of al Qaeda that could incite further attacks. Comparing and even equating episodes of “Frasier” with a bin Laden video forces an acknowledgment that the latter is not available to U.S. television audiences. The frivolity of a situation comedy is contrasted with the propaganda produced by the mastermind of the September 11 attacks, an individual who is still at large and potentially capable of organizing another terrorist attack. While even the most politically and culturally aware individual viewing “Saturday Night Live” may not begin to interrogate the Pentagon’s policy regarding why or why not bin Laden videos should be broadcast after hearing a comment comparing a situation comedy with the release of an al Qaeda propaganda video, a recognition that U.S. television viewers watch “Frasier” while the Arab world sees and hears bin Laden does provide a critique of the average U.S. television viewer’s level of global awareness.

Additionally, a viewer may have the cultural knowledge that the creator and executive producer of “Frasier,” David Angell, died in the September 11 attacks while aboard American Airlines Flight 11, one of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center. The juxtaposition of bin Laden and “Frasier” goes beyond a comparison of United States and Arab television

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20 Actually, the Pentagon did release one bin Laden tape: the first video he released after September 11, 2001 that implicated bin Laden in the attacks.
programming to an acknowledgment that the al Qaeda leader changed our culture in multiple ways, including killing the creator of one of television’s most popular comedies. The viewer with background information about current and cultural events, which in this case involves details about September 11 as well as a television show, might connect bin Laden and “Frasier” with 9/11. This comment would be received on a deeper level, which might prompt a more trenchant critique than a lack of global awareness in the United States.

The “Bush is dumb” jokes, as well as the bin Laden comparisons, require audience foreknowledge of certain cultural and historic events. However, audience members vary greatly in their individual knowledge about any given situation and those with increased awareness of the context of a particular joke may experience more satisfaction stemming from the completion of a comedic enthymeme. For example, those viewers who knew that the creator of “Frasier” died in the 9/11 attacks would receive the comparison of the show with a bin Laden video in a different manner than those who were unaware of Mr. Angell’s death. In any enthymeme, the audience must fill in the gap(s) in information, logic or context, but the comedic enthymeme also must employ certain assumptions that any audience would agree with (e.g. presidents should be smart), and also make further connections between and among incongruous elements introduced in a humorous comment or skit (e.g. bin Laden and Ozzy Osbourne). In this manner, an individual with a high degree of knowledge with respect to popular culture, historical events and public figures would experience a potentially deeper satisfaction and meaning from certain comedic discourses. This also helps to convey what Kenneth Burke meant by “perspective by incongruity” as a means to “‘remoralize’ by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy” (Burke [1937] 1984, 309). Completing the comedic enthymeme provides a
perspective by incongruity, which forces an acknowledgement that a person or event is risible and worthy of ridicule, a perspective that lingers after exposure to the joke.

I have demonstrated how a person with a broad knowledge of cultural events uses his or her own memory in decoding and interpreting comedic enthymemes. But the temporal complexity of epideictic discourse and topical humor also allows for it to provoke memories concerning past events that may have been forgotten and to maintain public attention in matters of contemporary importance. For example, David Letterman made a series of jokes during this time frame implicating the Saudis and U.S. flight schools in the 9/11 attacks: “Saudi Prince Abdullah is visiting President Bush at his Texas ranch. After that, like many other Saudis, he’ll go enroll at a U.S. flight school” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 04/26/02); “Well, you know it’s June and for al Qaeda it is graduation time from flight school” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 06/05/02); “This show is like a Florida flight school. We’ll let anybody in.” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 06/06/02); and, “Earlier today I received quite an honor. I received a request to give the commencement address at a Florida flight school” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 06/10/02).

These four comments convey specific reminders concerning the 9/11 attacks: the hijackers were primarily Saudi Arabian; al Qaeda members graduated from flight schools in order to carry out the attacks; and these flight schools were located in Florida. Further, none of these comments is very funny, even given the temporal distance from the attacks. These wry comments serve as a reminder of specific details concerning the events of 9/11, specifically the involvement of individuals from Saudi Arabia and the lax admission enrollment standards at Florida flight schools. Further, the President is implicated in these details by noting that he is hosting the Saudi Prince at his Texas ranch. This suggests a shared skepticism regarding the
United States government’s relationship with the Saudi royal family, a relationship that dates back to the first President Bush.

Further, the mention of Florida flight schools evokes the specific method of the attacks. Not only were U.S. planes used as weapons, but the hijackers also received their training from flight schools located in the United States. This dual failure of security and screening at airports and flight schools reminds and/or informs Letterman’s viewers about the potential culpability of U.S. institutions failing to protect citizens from a terrorist attack. The involvement of Saudis in the attacks can also be interpreted by audience members as either a reminder or as new information, which allows for the comments to affect people who either possess full recollection of the issues or who may have been unaware of the connection. For the previously uninformed, Letterman’s sardonic wit provides them with new facts about the attacks of 9/11, thus serving as education. They also serve an epideictic function because of the negativity surrounding the connection of President Bush with the Saudi royal family, a position that seeks the audience’s agreement that the relationship is troublesome, a criticism not made previously by topical humorists.

I have provided some examples of comedic enthymemes and how they rely upon shared assumptions and values. Singly, they serve as a means to prompt audience participation and pleasure to varying degrees depending upon previous knowledge concerning the objects of comparison and/or ridicule. Cumulatively, these enthymemes contribute to the function of topical humor as an epideictic discourse. Because audiences are prompted to become active participants in the completion and interpretation of comedic enthymemes, this involvement offers a sense of authorship and satisfaction, according to Burke, which increases the potential for topical humor to influence attitudes about the subjects of these jokes, an influence that carries
over to future reception of discourse relating to the same topics. But it is also the reliance on shared cultural ideals that makes topical humor an exercise in epideictic discourse. Additionally, the jokes made during the adaptation phase have an increasingly sharper critical edge with respect to topics relating to 9/11, which reflects the nation’s increasing skepticism.

On June 11, 2002, Jay Leno used an analogy to make a new threat, a “dirty bomb,” comprehensible to the audience: “The government has arrested an American who allegedly had ties to al Qaeda and was planning to set off a radioactive dirty bomb in Washington. See, a dirty bomb is a regular bomb coated to make it more deadly. It is the same principle as a corn dog” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 06/12/02). The equating of a dirty bomb with a corn dog is ridiculous, which helps to reduce tensions and fears concerning another terrorist attack. But it also educates the audience about what a dirty bomb is: a bomb with a scary name. Such an educative function is consistent with the aims of epideictic rhetoric.

In an interview with Connie Chung, Jon Stewart spoke about the frenzy surrounding the discovery of a dirty bomb as follows:

Dirty bomb, that was a great example of excess. When the dirty bomb was announced, the first thing that happened is everybody went into dirty bomb mode. And everybody got on the phone, dirty bomb, we got a dirty bomb expert over there. What is a dirty bomb? Well, it’s not this, and then they would show a nuclear explosion. It’s not that, or it’s not – and they would, you know, basically just jazz everybody up until the very end of it, they’d go, and in conclusion, this is not a very dangerous thing at all. It’s like the old . . . scare tactics to get you to watch [the news]” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 06/25/02).

Leno’s comments were made on the day that the “dirty bomber” was arrested, and he was able to provide his audience with an analogy that made the potential threat less frightening by exposing the exaggerations and fear tactics employed by the news media. On the next evening, Leno noted: “The White House is now backing away from how serious of a threat this dirty bomb guy
was. Apparently, Ashcroft may have overstated this dirty bomb threat. They said it wasn’t a dirty bomb, turns out the guy was building a really bad stink bomb” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 06/13/02).

The amount of information conveyed by Leno in a few short sentences illustrates the efficiency of topical humor in conveying both information and an attitude. On two subsequent evenings Leno provided his audience with information that someone who planned on making a dirty bomb was arrested, and that both the media and the Attorney General overstated the threat of the bomb and the plan. The words used to describe this threat were also mocked: a bomb by any name is still a bomb, be it “dirty,” stink or otherwise. Leno was able to cut through the fear tactics used by the government and the media, providing his audience with information, comfort and a heightened perspective to properly distinguish absurdities from actualities, thus facilitating adjustment to a changed world.

Leno and Letterman also used analogies in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 by comparing Osama bin Laden with other, less threatening people or circumstances. In these situations, analogies functioned to help deflate the trauma surrounding the situation by helping to contextualize unfamiliar and threatening events through comparisons to more familiar and comforting occurrences. A type of deflation is also present in Leno’s dirty bomb analogy, in that a corn dog is typically considered fairly innocuous and is also recognizable. However, specifically noting that the Attorney General “overstated” the threat of a dirty bomb is a critique of the response to the threat, in addition to easing audience anxieties over the “discovery” of this new type of bomb. The quality of jokes made during the adaptation phase were increasingly critical of government policy and the media than those made previously, indicating that
audiences were adjusting to the changes taking place in the nation. The skepticism contained in these observations both reflects and encourages the nation’s adaptation to a changing world.

**Weapons of Comic Instruction in The Onion**

Topical humor also uses paradox as a rhetorical tool to inform audiences about current events and influence attitudes about these matters. Chaim Perelman describes paradox as a trope that “forces us to modify the usual meaning of words by a reinterpretation, in order to eliminate what appears as an inconsistency when the statement is taken literally” (Perelman 1979, 84). This definition is similar to how individuals process comedic incongruities in order to understand a joke, or how a perspective by incongruity is created through topical humor. *The Onion* frequently employs paradox and a perspective by incongruity, and an example from this time period is an article in the June 19, 2002 issue: “Is the FBI Doing Enough to Prevent the July 19 Attacks?” (*The Onion* 2002, 38:23).

An hourglass sand timer, one that is half empty, is pictured sitting on top of the seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On-line, an icon – “read more” – is located immediately next to the photo. But when the link is selected, a page opens that does not contain any further information. In the print edition, it is indicated that the story is continued within the paper; however, there is no actual article. The photo and the headline are the only elements of this story, even though it is indicated that more content exists. This omission creates a generic paradox: an article should follow the headline. Interestingly, the information that is presented within the headline is shockingly specific by indicating that an attack will take place within one month. The depiction of time symbolically running out of the hourglass, coupled with a lack of any specific information concerning the attack, heightens fear and anxiety over an impending terrorist attack.
In addition to breaking the standard newspaper format, another paradox is created by this headline for readers aware of the ongoing investigations and critiques of the FBI over their lack of preparedness for the attacks of 9/11. These inquiries into the failure to prevent the terrorist acts on September 11 focused on whether or not past information existed, and The Onion article reframes this by focusing upon a specific date in the future and asking what is being done to prevent these potential attacks. Initially, it seems absurd that the headline lists the date of July 19 but fails to provide any additional information. However, the reader reinterprets this inconsistency by placing it in context with the only other attacks that the FBI is currently investigating: 9/11. This re-contextualization makes it seem absurd that the FBI would focus on past attacks at the expense of preventing future incidents of terror. Additionally, a critique is conveyed that the security of the nation has not improved since the September 11 attacks.

Another article contained within The Onion also deals with the possibility of future attacks and a lack of information, but this time it is the government that is not forthcoming with details, rather than the paper. The headline, “Life Jackets Issued to All Americans For Some Reason” is followed by an article that quotes Homeland Security Director, Tom Ridge: “Everything is fine. You have nothing to worry about. . . . Still, just to be 100 percent on the safe side, I would urge all Americans to keep these life vests on at all times. . . . The best thing for everyone to do is simply go about their normal lives. With their life vests on, of course” (The Onion 2002, 38:21).

The article goes on to report: “Ridge said he was not at liberty to divulge the specific reason for the unprecedented national life-jacket distribution,” but Vice President Dick Cheney was “inadvertently” more forthcoming by telling “reporters it was just ‘routine procedure,’ and that it had nothing to do with any false rumors of thermal bombs planted beneath the ice caps”
(The Onion 2002, 38:21). This apparent lack of information conveys the real reason for the distribution, as well as noting the uniqueness of the situation. It is absurd to imagine the logistics of providing life vests, “a packet of fluorescent-orange marker dye, shark repellent pellets, and three magnesium flares” to all U.S. citizens, not to mention “water wings” for children (The Onion 2002, 38:21). This absurdity is heightened for readers who remember that Tom Ridge advised citizens in February of 2002 to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting in order to seal doors and windows in the event of another terrorist attack.

These two examples from The Onion suggest that a paradox can transfer the existence of absurdity from the fake article to events taking place in reality, similar to how Dana Sutton’s process of comic catharsis purges negative feelings by transferring the emotions from the surrogate to the target. The existence of a headline that promises a terrorist attack within one month but lacks a story is absurd due to newspaper conventions and common sense. Put into context with the ongoing investigations into the attacks of 9/11, the backward focus of intelligence agencies and the belief that future attacks can be prevented is exposed as absurd.

Similarly, it is ridiculous to imagine every citizen of the U.S. wearing a life vest without being provided any specific information concerning why they must do so, let alone how this distribution would actually take place. Since President Bush announced the creation of the Office of Homeland Security in September of 2001, very few concrete products have been developed. Two examples include the color-coded warning system that was widely mocked as ineffectual, and the recommendation to purchase duct tape and plastic sheeting to prevent fallout from any additional terrorist attacks, also known as a “duct” and cover policy. The Onion stories focus a critical lens on government policies, a lens that affords readers a “perspective by incongruity” with which to realign the paradox presented in these stories. More importantly,
these satirical articles intimate that it is impossible to prevent any and all future terrorist activities, instead applying common sense and sense of humor, the twin pillars of American humor.

Common sense and a sense of humor are two American values that are featured in the examples of topical humor just mentioned. Distinguishing among various types of bombs does not prevent or decrease the risk of these weapons; therefore, the appellation of “dirty” is not a helpful distinction from national security nor even newsworthy. Leno’s mockery of the use of the term “dirty bomb” relies on the assumption that audiences will think this term is a foolish distinction made by John Ashcroft and news outlets. The Onion also relies upon the common sense of the audience to interpret a headline and graphic lacking a full story as a critique of the lack of information forthcoming from traditional news outlets. Additionally, this “story,” coupled with the other article that related how life jackets were distributed to the nation, calls into question the abilities of the government to prevent any future terrorist attacks. Indeed, through this questioning of appropriate reactions and attitudes to 9/11, adaptation to a world where terrorism may always be a possibility is reflected and encouraged because of the increased level of skepticism employed by topical humorists. A skeptical viewpoint, which often is the result of humor and common sense, was not as vibrant during the previous anger and acceptance phases. But as the nation’s skepticism increased, this was reflected and encouraged in topical humor relating to 9/11.

In addition to common sense, late night television also relied upon another shared national attitude in jokes made during this time period: the value of hard work. A specific target singled out for ridicule by Leno and Letterman was the President’s month-long vacation in August of 2002, a criticism that was expressed in advance of and for the entire duration of the
holiday. I cannot include every comment due to the sheer number of criticisms levied by Leno and Letterman over the entire month. Instead, I will select one from each host in advance of the break, and then one from each at the end of the vacation to serve as exemplars.

Letterman noted: “George Bush, our president, is taking a month-long vacation. He’s the only one in the country who can afford a vacation at all. . . . People were kind of upset, with all the economic problems, the terrorist threats, that George Bush is taking a month off. White House officials said he was taking the month off to unwind. My question is, when does he wind?” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 07/29/02). The next evening Leno made this comment: “President Bush jogged and played golf over the weekend. Thank God he got that out of the way before he takes his month long vacation. Thank God we got that war and Middle East thing cleared up” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 07/30/02).

Letterman made this observation toward the end of President’s Bush’s hiatus: “According to intelligence reports, Osama bin Laden is back running al Qaeda. I guess what that means is their leader got back from vacation before our leader” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 08/28/02). Once the break had ended, Leno made this remark: “The stock market was down today. Two major businesses declared bankruptcy, consumer spending is at an all time low – in other words – Bush is back on the job” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/04/02). These specific comments serve to bookend the President’s vacation, but Leno and Letterman also provided nightly reminders concerning the President’s whereabouts during the entire span of his vacation, specifically that he is not in Washington, D.C..

Leno and Letterman held the President accountable for taking a month-long vacation at a time when citizens themselves could ill afford to take time off due to a poor domestic economy. Additionally, this was a time of war, and the duties of the Commander in Chief were considered
important. These nightly criticisms during the President’s holiday made it impossible to be a viewer of Leno and/or Letterman and not be aware of the month-long break. It was assumed that the audience would agree that the timing and length of this vacation was wrong, a position that was developed over the course of roughly twenty-eight nights.

Another line of jokes made by Leno and Letterman during this time related to the 2000 election and Al Gore. On December 14, 2002, Al Gore himself got into the act of reminding people of the 2000 election results when he hosted “Saturday Night Live.” Gore participated in a skit that involved the set and cast of “The West Wing.” Ostensibly on a tour of the staged White House, Gore stops at the “oval office” to visit with Martin Sheen and asks if he can sit in the “president’s” chair. Sheen allows him to do so, commenting that Gore probably never got a chance to do so when he was Vice President. Rather than continuing on with the tour, Gore stays behind in the “oval office” and begins to yell into the telephone, “Get me Putin!” (Saturday Night Live, 12/14/02). When other cast members stop by to meet Al Gore several hours later, they are disturbed by the ex-Vice President’s fascination with the mock up of the oval office. When Gore asks to stay the night on the set to the discomfort of the actors, Bradley Whitford explains this strange behavior by stating, “Well, he did win the popular vote” (Saturday Night Live, 12/14/02).

The humor of the Al Gore skit on “Saturday Night Live” emerges when viewed as an example of Dana Sutton’s comedic catharsis and cultural values. Al Gore’s appearance makes him both the target and a surrogate for jokes made regarding the loss of the 2000 presidential election, jokes that were frequent in the year after September 11. Demonstrating that he was “in on” the joke allowed the audience to see a more flexible Gore, in contrast with his comedic stereotype as being stiff and lacking a sense of humor. Further, this allows Gore to become a part
of the conspiracy of humor as he demonstrated that he could mock himself. On the surface, this skit is at the expense of Al Gore. However, additional layers of interpretation emerge when one questions why jokes about the 2000 election cycle are being made during this time frame in 2002. The success of this line of humor relies upon an inference that assumes free and fair elections are valued in society. Jokes relating to the 2000 election were not popular during the anger or acceptance phases, indicating that the adaptation phase allowed for a return to questioning the legitimacy of the contested election. This suggests that the professed unity of the nation in the aftermath of 9/11 was indeed fracturing, a sign of adjustment to new circumstances.

The appearance of Al Gore on “Saturday Night Live” also relies upon an agreed social value: politicians should be able to laugh at themselves. The significance of politicians participating in popular culture entertainment outlets to demonstrate their “everyman” sense of humor may have begun in the 1968 presidential race with Nixon’s appearance on “Laugh In.” Paul Keyes, a writer for the show, and George Schlatter, the show’s creator, were able to persuade Richard Nixon to say the show’s famous tag line, “Sock it to me!” at a press conference in Los Angeles, but were unsuccessful in convincing Hubert Humphrey to say, “I’ll sock it to you, Dick!” even though they repeatedly contacted him about it (Althouse 2004). Looking back on the event, Schlatter commented: “And Humphrey later said that not doing it may have cost him the election. We didn’t realize how effective it was going to be. But there were other factors in the election, too—I can’t take all the blame” (Althouse 2004).

Regardless of whether or not the tag line from “Laugh In” won Nixon the election in 1968, U.S. citizens have responded positively to politicians who demonstrate a proclivity for humor or comedic self-deprecation. In his examination of humor as a substantive element of American culture and history, Joseph Boskin notes: “Even though politics has always had its
joking component, public image has become political destiny with humor in a notably enlarged role,” and the politician who best exhibits this cultural identification is best able to “deflect criticisms and enlarge[d] their human image” (Boskin 1997, 5). Humor is important to establish the proper image for a politician, and image definitely matters in contemporary politics.

During the time period at issue in this chapter, David Letterman was interviewed by Ted Koppel and addressed the issue of how presidential candidates in 2000 used his show to make a favorable impression on his audience:

Well, I have a very graphic example of that. As the election was closer and closer. We had Al Gore on, we had George W. Bush on and we had others on. I’m not sure what we were doing, but we certainly had the presidential candidates on. And then, with, I guess, less than a week to go to Election Day, we received a call from one of the [two major] candidates offering himself up to participate in comedy on the show. Not an interview, but they would be willing to show up and do comedy. . . . And I just, I had to laugh. I just thought, ‘Are they really that desperate? Are they really that silly?’ I mean, has something indicated to them that this will make a difference in the outcome of the election. And then we declined the offer. . . . It just seemed silly. . . . I mean, it was interesting to me because I don’t think, in the case of Bush or Gore, that either of them were particularly thrilled with their appearances here” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 07/08/02).

Perhaps it was the perception that they did badly on the show that Gore or Bush wanted to correct by making an additional appearance, or perhaps they simply wanted some free access to the voting public.

Not only is a sense of humor appreciated among the general public, but politicians are also expected to demonstrate that they possess a sense of humor in order to identify with their audience. Humor is an important cultural value in U.S. identity and candidates running for elected office must establish themselves as one of the people by making witty remarks or appearing on popular entertainment programs. Providing at least the illusion of wit or a sense of
humor has become (and perhaps has always been) a vital component of a politician’s ethos. Indeed, the federal government surveyed Americans in the 1980s to identify common national characteristics and the only question that received a unanimous positive response was, “Do you have a sense of humor?” (Boskin 1997, 71). For citizens of the United States, humor is a defining cultural trait valued in citizens and politicians alike.

The 2002 season of “Saturday Night Live” featured two of the losing candidates from the 2000 election, indicating a continued rise in the status of guests appearing on topical humor shows after September 11. Both John McCain and Al Gore hosted the show, on October 19 and December 14, respectively. While McCain was two years away from running for re-election to his Senate seat, Gore was not actively involved in politics at all. Both hosts marked a departure from “Saturday Night Live’s” regular selection of movie stars, television actors, musicians and athletes. The uniqueness of these political figures appearing as the main guests on a comedy sketch show within two months of each other in 2002 is notable in and of itself; however, the humor that they participated in is illuminating with respect to the admixture of politics and topical humor as a form of entertainment and an exercise in epideictic discourse that reflects common national values.

Both Gore and McCain participated in a recurring skit on “Saturday Night Live” that mocks “Hardball with Chris Matthews,” an MSNBC news and talk show. Matthews frequently has politicians on his show, but instead of appearing as themselves, McCain impersonated Attorney General John Ashcroft and Al Gore parodied then Senator Minority Leader Trent Lott. In a parody of Chris Matthews, Darrell Hammond shouts at his guests to encourage them to be entertaining rather than informative, a common critique made against many contemporary cable
news shows. As such, this skit is not only a parody of Matthews, but also a satire of news talk shows in general.

On the show with “Attorney General Ashcroft,” “Matthews” asks his guests: “Are we safer today than we were pre-9/11?” “Ashcroft” responded in this manner: “Security starts with vigilance. As Americans, we will never truly be free until each and every one of us is afraid of being thrown in jail. But thanks to the TIPS program, we’ve been able to detain tens of thousands of potential American terrorists for **months** at a time, for little or no reason. Just like the Founding Fathers dreamed!” (Saturday Night Live, 10/19/02). Following the format of having a guest from each side of the political spectrum, “Rebecca DeWitt,” Associate Director for the ACLU, is asked to respond to “Ashcroft:” “Chris, we’re living in a police state. Most of the people detained under Mr. Ashcroft’s orders haven’t been charged with a crime or given access to legal counsel. The Taliban prisoners at Guantanamo Bay are being denied their basic human rights. They can’t practice their religion, they’re not allowed access to their weapons, they can’t even confer with their terrorist leader! It’s **appalling**!” (Saturday Night Live, 10/19/02).

Both positions from the Attorney General and the ACLU are extreme: one wants to “make the Arab language, or anything that sounds like it, **illegal**,” while the other believes the country should “give the terrorists guns and badges, and the ability to arrest law enforcement and military personnel. That way, there are checks and balances” (Saturday Night Live, 10/19/02). The gross exaggeration of the positions from the right and left makes each side look ridiculous and both “solutions” appear untenable. However, because a Senator from Arizona is impersonating the Attorney General, an additional level of meaning is added. Both men are
Republicans, and so it is not simply partisan mockery. Rather, McCain enacts and performs dissent as a critique of extreme policies.

Further, McCain mentions a specific program that potentially infringes on civil liberties (TIPS) and reminds the audience of the controversy surrounding the suspected abuse of detainees taken during the war on terror. The audience is provided information about these prisoners of war, but the manner in which it is conveyed influences audience attitudes about these actions taken in response to acts of terrorism. The Founding Fathers are seemingly invoked as supporters of this extreme action, which calls into question the current trajectory of policies that serve to limit the freedoms outlined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. While neither side is presented favorably in this news show parody, audiences are left to discern a middle ground between the two extremes.

Al Gore’s parody of Trent Lott differs from McCain’s impersonation in that Lott and Gore are from opposing political parties. While McCain may have been performing dissent within his own party, Gore was performing a censure of Lott, who had recently made the observation that America would have been better off if Strom Thurmond, a staunch segregationist, had been elected President in 1948. By way of explanation, “Lott” told “Matthews”: “Chris, when I said our country wouldn’t have had all these problems if Strom Thurmond had been elected President, it had nothing to do with segregation. I simply meant that things would have been better if Thurmond were President, because he would have kept white people and black people separate. I just hate it when liberals take me out of context like that” (Saturday Night Live, 12/14/02). This “explanation” rejects the possibility that Lott’s statement could be interpreted in a way that did not appear racist.
The other guest on this edition of “Hardball” was “Amy Saborn,” the lead strategist for the Democratic National Committee. Rather than oppose “Lott,” “Saborn” attempts to present the Democratic agenda as being distinct from that of the Republicans, but instead conveys no discernible difference between the two parties: “Chris, the Democratic Party condemns Senator Lott’s comments. We believe they are deplorable and worthy of censure. Unless, somehow it turns out that everyone is cool with what he said, in which case, so are we!” (Saturday Night Live, 12/14/02). While the “Hardball” with John McCain/Ashcroft exaggerated both political parties as a means to prompt skepticism about their individual policies, this example calls into question whether or not there is truly a difference in each party’s political agendas.

These parodies are examples of satire in line with a tradition that dates back to Aristophanes. Because all groups involved (Republicans, Democrats, the media) are made to appear ridiculous and risible, audiences are left to intuit the middle ground among the extremes as being reasonable and just. While examples of satire are discussed in Chapter 3, these skits taking place in late 2002 are far more critical of policies and practices than those produced from September 2001 to May 2002. Audiences were still aware of the events of 9/11 and how they changed the nation, but by this period of time, the country had adapted to a new status quo that allowed for stronger criticisms through ridicule. The lack of a person or group to represent the middle ground in politics and/or the media is worthy of concern and public attention, and these skits call attention to a lack of reasonableness in public discussions.

Both “Hardball” parodies criticize contemporary media news programs. Additionally, the current state of political parties and policies is presented as being ridiculous from two perspectives. One is that neither sought a renewed consensus among political representatives or
the nation, a unity that was fractured after the contested 2000 election but had been smoothed over in the wake of September 11. The other critique that the parody of “Hardball” presents is a perceived lack of “loyal opposition” from the Democratic party, a necessary requirement to stand up to the alleged racism and backward thinking of the Republican party illustrated by Lott’s comments regarding Thurmond. Both parodies provide information about current events, and the highly critical perspectives encourage viewers to question the current state of politics in both a general and particular manner. This encouragement is heightened by the participation of elected government officials in these satiric skits.

The audience is also encouraged to participate in these parodies. Such involvement can range from laughter, a response that suggests agreement in the proper objects of ridicule (disagreement also intimates involvement), and possibly also identifying the middle ground that is left out of these satirical parodies. By watching non-productive and stultifying arguments on “Saturday Night Live,” audiences come to see such discourse as unreasonable. Future exposure to discourse that echoes the radical positions ridiculed on the show will result in disdain and/or laughter from audience members who have been exposed to this lack of reasoned discourse in a satiric polarization of political parties and/or the media. These skits cast judgment on the extreme positions that they parody and audiences either agree or disagree with the objects of ridicule. Such a negotiation of the topics worthy of ridicule or censure is an exercise in epideictic discourse.

A recurring theme in the humor introduced so far in this chapter is that citizens need to be provided with adequate information from the government and the media. This expectation contrasts with the willingness to trust the government demonstrated in the eight months after 9/11. The free flow of information is a vital element for a properly functioning democracy. The
jokes relating to this topic (e.g. the “dirty bomb”, future terrorist attacks) rely on the fact that audiences overwhelmingly agree that they should not be misled by the media or the government. This shared belief allows these examples to maintain a shared frame of reference. According to Marlia Banning, “information . . . is core to public deliberation; without it, public deliberation and related civic actions are circumscribed by the limits of what can be exercised as ‘common’” (Banning 2005, 76). Topical humor not only conveys information about current events, but also provides a skeptical and comic attitude from which to view contemporary practices. Additionally, by relying on shared values, topical humor helps maintain a common identity that allows for discussions regarding topics of collective concern. Such a common identity was required once the unity experienced in the wake of 9/11 began to fracture, as indicated by a return to partisan politics shown in the “Saturday Night Live” skits.

However, topical humor is not immune to problems relating to the dissemination of vital information in the United States. Banning notes: “it is increasingly difficult for various American publics to determine what to believe, given the information presented to them” (Banning 2005, 77), and topical humor does not always provide accurate information about current events. David Letterman made several comments during this time frame that accepted the administration’s intelligence regarding Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. More damaging, Letterman also seemed to perpetuate the idea that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were somehow connected to Saddam Hussein. On July 12, 2002, the number one spot on Letterman’s “Top Ten Perks of Being Saddam Hussein’s Stepson” was: “Get to call bin Laden ‘Uncle Saddam’” ("The Hotline: Laugh Track," 07/15/02). Another list, “Top Ten Saddam Hussein Tips for a Romantic Evening” included number four, “Say it with toxic nerve agents,”
and number one, “Ask if she wants to ‘inspect your biological weapon’” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 09/10/02).

Rather than provide a skeptical perspective, these examples from Letterman demonstrate a repetition and support of administration propaganda in one instance (connection of Iraq and Osama bin Laden), and acceptance of military intelligence in another (Iraq had WMDs). Of course, David Letterman cannot be held solely responsible for these connections in the minds of U.S. citizens. Many people, including senior administration officials, accepted the intelligence reports concerning Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, and it has only recently been hypothesized that these weapons likely never existed. As for the link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, only three percent of people in the country thought that Iraq was involved when polling took place immediately after the 9/11 attacks; however, by February of 2003, 44% thought that some of the hijackers were from Iraq, and 45% thought that Saddam Hussein was directly involved (Feldmann 2003).

These examples from Letterman illustrate that relying on assumed intelligence to create humor may perpetuate inaccuracies and ignorance. However, other forms of discourse and more traditional sources of information in the public sphere also advanced the same erroneous facts in 2002. Rather than assigning blame to Letterman for failing to be critical or skeptical with respect to every current event, I believe this blind spot demonstrates how similar humor can be to other forms of informative discourse. We are always limited by current knowledge and how or what information is presented in the public sphere. What is in humor’s favor is its combination of information concerning current events, a reliance on national values, and an ability to critique through ridicule that furthers a sense of a common identity, allowing for broader public
discussions and more informed actions in response to 9/11. Additionally, Letterman did remind his audience that some of the terrorists related to 9/11 were from Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion: The Value of Topical Humor

The above examples illustrate how topical humor functions as a form of epideictic discourse that relies on shared values to create and sustain a community informed about current events. Because of the reliance on core principles and the mutual creation of meaning in topical humor’s use of comedic enthymemes and parodies, it is not a stretch to place topical humor under the umbrella term of epideictic rhetoric. What distinguishes the adaptation phase from the anger and acceptance phases is that the unity experienced in the wake of attacks was beginning to fracture. Topical humor unites a community through its reliance on shared values and its conspiratorial nature. While shared values and the conspiracy of topical humor were present in varying degrees during the previous phases, it became more important to facilitate communal adjustments to the ongoing war on terror when the nation seemed to be dividing along partisan lines. Additionally, an increased amount of skepticism regarding individual behavior and governmental policies post-9/11 emerged in the nation, a trend that can be found in the humor produced during the adaptation phase. This skepticism helps foster adjustments to the changes taking place in the nation and the world.

However, the shared values relied upon in topical humor should not be confused with a reductive singularity. In addition to providing a hopeful vision of the world through the use of the comic frame, topical humor also provides a “perspective by incongruity” through the use of satire and irony. As Joseph Gusfield notes in his introduction to the work of Kenneth Burke, a comic corrective allows audiences to transcend “the limitations which any single system of thought and classification places on us. It is an unsettling process in which transformation is
potentially possible” (Burke 1989, 8). Being able to see from more than one position within society helps to foster an informed collective capable of taking actions in the best interests of society.

The process of ridicule found in topical humor identifies values that should be accepted or rejected, therefore allowing for changes in societal norms, as well as shifts in standards of reasonableness. The content of topical humor is constantly changing, but the focus is generally directed to matters of importance. Indeed, Leno, Letterman, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion consistently critique those in positions of power, which is in and of itself a form of dissent. However, this dissent seeks and establishes consensus with respect to those persons and objects deserving of ridicule, helping to foster a unified collective through a reliance on and articulation of shared national values.

Regardless of the diversity of any given audience, there always exist some commonalities in either shared values or a shared frame of reference. Current events or popular culture frequently serve as examples of commonality for topical humorists. These assumed values can be extremely broad, such as a belief in the supremacy of free and fair elections or the importance of hard work. The condensed form of humor means that it generally invokes the most basic values and references to popular culture people and events, which allows for various levels of interpretation depending upon an individual’s cultural knowledge. All of the examples used in this chapter demonstrate the reliance on common ideals and shared standards of not only reasonableness, but also democratic expectations. Because of topical humor’s fluency and efficiency in evoking core beliefs and values, it is uniquely capable of functioning as epideictic rhetoric.
Even though Letterman, and at times Leno, occasionally relied upon bad information in crafting topical humor that informed and influenced people, they are not unique or remarkably negligent in this regard. Indeed, all fragments, inferences, assumptions and arguments taking place in the public sphere can at times produce bad or inaccurate information. However, all of these examples of topical humor generally engage in a process of criticism through ridicule that helps audiences to think critically and skeptically about matters of importance to the democratic collective. The playful use of language that humor traffics in also encourages the use of imagination that facilitates new ideas or perspectives. Because of this astute use of language, an ability to identify shared values, brevity, provocation of imagination, and its popularity, humor must be considered an important and vital example of epideictic discourse in contemporary society and a discourse that reflects and encourages an adaptation to and skepticism of reactions in the wake of 9/11.

Topical humor is also a form of epideictic discourse, and its producers questioned the efficacy of extreme emotions and asserted the benefit of humor to the function of democracy. These reflections helped move the nation toward acceptance of the attacks. Eventually, topical humorists also crafted comedic discourse that both reflected and facilitated adaptation to the post-9/11 world. However, the nation’s reaction to the attacks of 9/11 began to take precedence over the attacks as time continued to pass and the national unity experienced after the attacks began to wane. Once the nation expelled anger and then accepted that terrorism was a reality, topical humor could become more critical of the President, government policies and the media relating to 9/11, indicating topical humor’s return to a role of social critique and the nation’s return to a negotiation concerning the proper objects of ridicule, shared values and standards of
reasonableness. The study of topical humor illustrates how the nation moved through phases of anger, acceptance and adaptation through participation in this form of epideictic rhetoric.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION:
ANGER, ACCEPTANCE AND ADAPTATION IN TOPICAL HUMOR POST-9/11

Tracking the jokes, skits and satirical articles appearing on “Saturday Night Live,” “The Late Show with David Letterman,” “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,” and The Onion goes well beyond documenting trends in popular culture. Rather, the individual and cumulative weight of the examples examined in this dissertation illustrates how topical humor not only served as a form of entertainment, but also reflected and encouraged the nation to move through the phases of anger, acceptance and adaptation in response to the tragic events of September 11. Once the nation somewhat stabilized after the attacks, topical humor returned to its function as a form of epideictic rhetoric that fostered a community that was both informed and critical of actions taken in the war on terror. Given the popularity and accessibility of the humor examined herein, these texts serve as indicators of how average citizens develop their attitudes and engage in discussions about issues in the public sphere.

Following the production of humor for one year after September 11 illuminates the progression and evolution of topical humor as it relates to a national tragedy. Patrick Morrow’s phases of anger, acceptance and adaptation (Morrow 1987) correspond well to the topical humor produced within one year after the terrorist attacks. Initially, topical humorists struggled over how to deal with the extreme emotions communally felt in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Focusing national anger on targets like Osama bin Laden helped the nation direct and purge negative emotions as a means to transcend the tragedy. Then, as the shock and fear slowly began to recede, topical humor helped to re-orient people to a changed world post-9/11 by helping audiences to accept and tolerate the fact that the attacks took place. Finally,
topical humor began to criticize U.S. reactions and responses to terrorist threats in this changed world, indicating an adaptation to 9/11 that included a healthy dose of skepticism. Humor helped the country to heal, reestablish a status quo, and find the means to discuss national politics critically in a climate that equated patriotism with silence. Topical humor not only reflected how society regained its footing in a changed world, but also provided the means to critique the transformation.

Humor, like any epideictic discourse, must adapt to changes in the cultural climate if it is to be accepted by an audience. The attacks of 9/11 made it difficult for the production of humor given that the nation’s focus was one of fear and mourning, topics not easily addressed by works of comedy. But humor on late night television and in *The Onion* addressed and invoked these negative emotions and, by doing so, helped to facilitate the transcendence of U.S. fear and grief by focusing and purging anger over the attacks. Humor simultaneously respected the tragic nature of the attacks of 9/11 and encouraged the adoption of a positive mental outlook— the comic vision – that allowed for people to accept and move beyond the calamity. Only then could the public engage in critical discussions about 9/11 free from the paralyzing nature of extreme tragedy and uncertainty, which is a mark of adaptation. Additionally, topical humor emerged as a unifying discourse when the nation began to splinter into partisan groups, a situation mocked in satirical skits and articles.

**First Phase: Anger**

In the four months after September 11, the majority of U.S. citizens experienced some kind of extreme negative emotion, such as sadness, grief, fear or anger. These affective states alter one’s perspective on the world, perpetuating a negative state of mind that inhibits the transcendence of tragic circumstances. Humor had to navigate the highly charged emotional
atmosphere post-9/11 in order for comedy to be tolerated. The production of humor marked the beginning of a shift in the nation from a negative state of mind to a positive state more conducive to a proper perspective on the world. A singular focus on tragic events is a distortion of reality, and humor helped audiences lessen the magnitude of the tragedy, allowing for a dual perspective (Morreall’s comic vision; Burke’s comic frame) on current events capable of transcending tragic circumstances.

Humor speaks in a double voice, using both emotions and intellect to construct a complex form of discourse. Morreall’s focus on incongruity and surprise privilege intellect over emotion and are an important addition to Freud’s relief theory, which asserts that humor is essentially just a release of emotions. For the first three weeks after September 11, late night talk shows suspended taping. Halting the production of nightly humor was required because individuals were not ready for this kind of discourse, preferring instead to watch television news programs in an attempt to gain information about the attacks and deal with the wave of negative emotions experienced communally within the country. That humor emerged again on a daily basis in the United States rather quickly after 9/11 is a testament not only to the spirit of the nation, but also speaks to the careful production of humor by Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, “Saturday Night Live,” and The Onion during this time period.

Emotions and intellect cannot be neatly separated. While paying close attention to the negative emotions evident after 9/11 was necessary, it was not sufficient to produce humor. Most of the initial forays into the production of mainstream humorous discourse were decidedly not funny because a rationale had to be provided to the audience regarding the production of humor in tragic times. Acknowledging and allowing for expressions of fear, sadness and anger was a necessary first step, but the late night jokes and satiric articles that were produced also relied
upon intellect to make a cognitive shift from a negative state to a more positive frame of mind. This shift can best be understood by looking at Kenneth Burke’s “comic frame.”

Topical humor used a comic frame to view the attacks of 9/11, but this did not mean that the extreme emotions of the tragedy were overlooked. Rather, the comic frame was used to frame tragic events within a perspective capable of transcending the extreme emotions evoked in response to the terrorist attacks. Such transcendence could not occur all at once; instead, the nation purged negative emotions through expressions of anger, and then moved slowly toward acceptance and adaptation to 9/11. The texts examined in this dissertation illustrate examples of humor that carefully negotiated negative emotions and required cognitive skills during a time of national crisis. Laughter is capable of releasing built up emotions – whether they are conscious or subconscious. But laughter, the physical expression of emotional release, is not the sole outcome of humor. Forging a new perspective, such as Burke’s comic frame, or allowing for a cognitive shift, which is how Morreall describes this process, arises from the imbrication of emotions and intellect in the creation and reception of topical humor: a double voice. This balance was difficult to maintain during a national tragedy such as 9/11, and the topical humor analyzed in this study were able to successfully employ both emotion (specifically anger) and intellect in order to facilitate and reflect the nation’s transcendence of the terrorist attacks.

The production of humor in the four months after September 11 was difficult in that it first had to somberly acknowledge the tragic circumstances, self-consciously define the role of humor in society, and seek authority for its very presence. When jokes did begin to come back, including those at the president’s expense despite insistence to the contrary, they helped to re-establish an attitude consistent with the comic frame. Such a perspective was necessary to attain relief from the negative emotions surrounding 9/11 and to foster the cognitive shift required to
provide a new perspective on the tragic events. Production of humorous discourse was
difficult during this time, but the discourse of topical illuminates how the nation articulated and
expressed anger over the terrorist attacks by directing these emotions at targets like Osama bin
Laden and other terrorists. Once this anger was identified and expelled, the nation could move
beyond this phase of extreme emotions and begin to tolerate the attacks.

Second Phase: Acceptance

During this phase, topical humor reflects how citizens re-oriented themselves to a
changing world by moving past extreme emotions toward an attitude of acceptance in order to
deal with the uncertainty of a post-September 11-existence. The genre of topical humor uses
news stories as a source of invention for jokes, which makes it both entertaining and informative,
but also influential with audiences. Topical humor also gains discursive strength from the special
relationship developed among producers and receivers, a conspiratorial connection that first
occurred centuries ago. Such a conspiratorial relationship is created by referencing current
topics of interest and by mocking people in positions of power to unite the common people
(Geffcken 1973, 12). The strategy of holding those in power accountable for current events
continues to this day by Leno, Letterman, *The Onion*, “Saturday Night Live” and their audiences.

*The Onion* and “Saturday Night Live” traffic in satire, as do the monologues of Leno and
Letterman albeit in a more truncated fashion. The object of satire is to mock extreme positions
concerning matters of importance in contemporary society. By ridiculing radical perspectives,
audiences are able to identify a middle ground that is more reasonable than the risible positions
depicted in a given work of satire. Helping audiences to identify a reasonable position by
mocking the extremes also involves receivers in the production of topical humor because they
must properly interpret and identify the objects of satire. This allows for what Burke refers to as
“satisfaction of authorship” (Burke 1967, 338), and strengthens the conspiratorial relationship and the potential for topical humor to influence audiences.

Topical humor enabled audiences to become more tolerant of the terrorist attacks because the use of the comic frame conveys hope for the future, a necessary element in accepting tragic events. Leno and Letterman also placed previous events into context with current events. While mentioning previous events is not something unique to humorous discourse, being more memorable than other messages is one of humor’s particular strengths. According to classical rhetorical textbooks, Larry Powell and Michael Nitz, messages employing humor stand out more in the minds of their audiences from other messages that do not include humor (Powell 1978; Nitz 2004). But it is not simply the joke that is remembered; the attitude that the joke conveys is also more likely to be recalled. Further, if audiences are prompted to laugh and/or think due to an exposure to humor, individuals may then take on the viewpoint of the producer of humor because of the shared sense of community between a humorist and his or her audience and the high credibility, or positive ethos, afforded to topical humorists.

Dana Sutton’s theory of comedy as a catharsis helps to explain how emotion and intellect function together in works of humor during the acceptance phase of humor. Combined with the comedic conspiracy that enables humor to be particularly influential, the concept of catharsis also illustrates how audiences could be moved from the phase of anger to acceptance: anger is purged by making threats the object of laughter, helping to facilitate acceptance. Asserting that humor is both intellectual and psychological, Sutton outlines how comedy brings about a catharsis in the audience through a purging of negative emotions. This is accomplished by selecting a target capable of evoking negative feelings in the audience, such as anxiety, fear, sexual aggression and hostility. The purgation process can occur on two levels: a simple release
achieved by laughing at the target and/or a deeper catharsis if the target is identified as having a basis in reality. This dual process of catharsis is also indicative of topical humor’s ability to speak in a double voice by using intellect and emotion to convey information and provide entertainment.

**Third Phase: Adaptation**

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed the way that citizens lived, as evidenced in increased waiting in lines for airport security, the invasion of Afghanistan, and a fear of future attacks. Individual, national and militaristic responses to 9/11 were the focus of a majority of news stories eight months after the attacks, and topical humor used these current events to create satire, skits and monologues in order to engage in cultural criticism. The approaching one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks was a major focus of mainstream news outlets, topical humorists and the nation in general. Producers and receivers of topical humor began to critique the nation’s reactions and responses to the events of 9/11 as indicated by an increasingly skeptical point of view.

The national unity experienced after 9/11 began to fracture at this time, as evidenced by a return to partisan politics. Once the nation had returned to these kinds of divisive practices, topical humor moved beyond its function of realigning attitudes and began to produce a critical discourse that relied upon shared values as a means to establish a community capable of living with the many changes taking place post-September 11. Because of this reliance on shared national values, topical humor is a form of epideictic rhetoric.

As a means to reference these shared values, topical humor employs what I have termed comedic enthymemes. These structures help illuminate how topical humor reflects, influences and critiques communal principles. There are many types of comedic enthymemes that require
the audience to supply a missing inference, and this practice assumes that individuals have some level of prior knowledge regarding an event or person, as well as an ability to interpret and agree upon the proper objects of ridicule. The more complicated or obscure the missing element in a comedic enthymeme, the more satisfaction an audience member will experience as a result of successfully decoding the work of humor. While comedic enthymemes were not unique to the acceptance phase of humor, their increasingly skeptical and complex nature marked a change from the humor produced in the anger and acceptance stages, indicating a return to the traditional function of topical humor in the United States that dates back to the nation’s founding.

Topical humor’s focus on important and timely issues allows for praise and blame to be rendered on contemporary subjects by seeking agreement on national principles as they apply in specific and timely cases. Such judgments are reached by using standards of reasonableness that are negotiated within the public sphere, standards that generally rely upon shared values.

Topical humor is a particularly effective form of critical discourse for several reasons. Primarily, the fact that it relies upon current events as a source of invention means that topical humor addresses exigent matters, topics that should be the focus of public discussions. Additionally, the epideictic elements contained within topical humor make this discourse a means to both maintain and subvert communal values among the general populace. There is an expectation that every person, place or object is fair game for mockery, as topical humor is typically not biased toward any political ideology, but rather engages in an equal opportunity skewering of all current events. This perceived lack of bias evident in topical humor infuses audiences with a sense that the producers are objective due to the fact that any topic is potential fodder for humorous observations. In this manner, audiences are helped to see the middle ground or reasonable position that falls between the extremes mocked. Topical humor functions
as a source of information that helps citizens to make reasoned judgments on current people
and events.

Topical humor affects attitudes and future engagements with discourses relating to
current events. The satire produced by The Onion, “Saturday Night Live,” and the witty
comments made by Leno and Letterman represent “a discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge
that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of the
situation” (Baym 2005, 267). This is consistent with Burke’s perspective by incongruity that
seeks to re-moralize a situation and such a practice is important to keep audiences informed
regarding important events taking place. Exposure to topical humor will influence audience
responses and facilitate involvement in public discussions relating to current event.

The informative function of topical humor is often overlooked, but it is an important and
productive element of this discourse. While some forms of humor perpetuate negative
stereotypes about racial, gender or sexual identities, topical humor’s focus on current events
enables this discourse to facilitate the nation’s negotiation of shared values and principles as they
apply to contemporary issues without simply relying upon longstanding prejudices. Topical
humor conveys information about important current events and provides the means to
contextualize contemporary actions with assumed national characteristics, ultimately leaving it
up to audiences to decide on the proper objects of mockery and whether the perceived values are
appropriate or worthy of ridicule. Producing epideictic discourse and performing criticism
advances both the existence and vibrancy of debate in the public sphere, and also facilitates
adaptation to a tragic event.

Topical humor critiques the United States’ reaction to terrorism and informs audiences
about these actions, as evidenced by jokes made about the rumors surrounding the potential
invasion of Iraq, parodies of the President continually expanding the “axis of evil,” and joking about the color coding system as being ineffective as well as expensive, to name just a few examples. Indeed, an examination of topical humor illustrates how this discourse kept a consistent focus on the nation’s reactions to 9/11, responses that began with extreme negative emotions ill-suited to helping individuals and the nation move beyond the attacks. Once anger and uncertainty had been reduced, topical humor returned to its traditional role as a respected and well-received critic of current events in the United States.

Future Studies in Topical Humor

Topical humor has been a popular and important rhetorical discourse in the history of the United States, whether or not it is produced during a time of tragedy. This study has focused entirely upon centrist-mainstream humor, to the neglect of humorous texts that articulate more subversive or conservative attitudes and opinions. This focus has privileged texts that are widely accessible and circulated (basic television shows and a periodical, each of which is distributed for free), and has offered insight into mainstream cultural values. To be sure, humor that deviates from mainstream positions also would benefit from rhetorical examination. Specifically, I intend to expand this rhetorical analysis to examine how minority status impacts the production and reception of topical humor.

Race and gender are important factors in topical humor because it potentially changes the values relied upon in comedic enthymemes. Instead of focusing specifically on national values, comedic enthymemes in humor produced by minorities would rely upon shared gender or racial characteristics. Additionally, because women and minority groups have historically been the objects of ridicule in humor that invokes stereotypes, the humor produced by minorities may even reference this public humiliation as a source of group identity. Further, topical humor’s
reliance on stereotypes to convey information quickly may also result in a rejection of such condensation by the group being caricatured, who may alternately rely upon a different set of characteristics to identify themselves and/or others.

A specific study worth pursuing involves the humor produced by Muslim-Americans in the aftermath of September 11. A group of stand-up Muslim comics, entitled “Allah Made Me Funny,” began to tour the United States and Canada in 2003. Mainly playing in mosques to predominantly Islamic audiences, these Muslim comics made jokes that had to negotiate their minority (and demonized) status within the majority culture. An example of one joke hints at this complexity: “I’m an American. But I’m an American Muslim. In fact, I consider myself a very patriotic American Muslim, which means I would die for this country . . . by blowing myself up . . . in a Dunkin Donuts” (Usman 2004).

This tour of Muslim comedians acted as unifiers for Muslim-Americans and ambassadors to the majority culture, similar to stand-up tours undertaken by minority groups across the nation’s history. For example, the “Chitlin’ Circuit” refers to a group of African-American comedians who toured during racial segregation in the United States, and the “Borscht Belt” refers to resorts in the Catskill Mountains, N.Y. that employed predominantly Jewish comics. Many comedians who began their careers on the “Chitlin Circuit” and in the “Borscht Belt” went on to successful mainstream careers (e.g. Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, Milton Berle and Lenny Bruce). A study of how Muslim-American humorists established their identity in the wake of 9/11 would illuminate a specific example of how topical humor acts as a negotiation of cultural values. Indeed, given that a sense of humor is an identifying characteristic for the majority of the nation, noting how a minority group illustrates their possession of this shared value would
provide insight into the success and failure of minority groups’ assimilation process on the United States.

Given the widespread appeal and multiple examples of topical humor, rhetorical examinations of how this discourse functions in society are important scholarly projects. Specifically, how topical humor potentially affects the negotiation of national values and/or group identity is an important contribution to public sphere studies. Examples of rational discourse should be expanded to include works of humor, especially those texts that convey news about current events within a wider context than that afforded by local media outlets. Topical humor allows for the past, present and future to be a part of the “story,” and further melds information with an attitude. A rhetorical examination of topical humor holds great potential to further theorize how democracy functions in an age of multiculturalism.

Significance of Topical Humor to Rhetorical Studies

The world changed after 9/11, as evidenced in frequent descriptions and explanations of current events as taking place in “a post-September 11” culture. But such divisions are so broad as to elide the many significant changes the United States went through in the wake of the attacks, from extreme emotions to an adaptation, albeit an uneasy one, to the changes required in an age of global terrorism. Paying close attention to topical humor exposes the nuances of this adaptation over the period of one year through a rhetorical examination of comedy relating to a national tragedy. Such an investigation exposed how the United States reacted and responded to a tragic event in relation to other occurrences, both past and present. Many examples of topical humor also focused on future courses of action.

Indeed, the reaction to terrorism affects more people than the act itself, and future courses of action should be the focus of discourse that seeks to inform discussions in the public sphere.
The events of September 11 killed close to 3,000 people, but the survivors are forever changed by the events because of the commitment of troops, increased security measures at locations such as airports and office buildings and a reprioritization of national and international funding with respect to security measures. Terrorism is most effective when it provokes extreme reactions that far surpass the damage inflicted by any individual acts of violence, which occurs when terrorism is understood symbolically. In an assessment of al Qaeda and the war on terror five years after the attacks, James Fallows notes: “No modern nation is immune to politically inspired violence, and even the best-executed antiterrorism strategy will not be airtight” (Fallows 2006, 62). As further support, Fallows quotes David Kilcullen, a senior advisor on counterterrorism at the State Department: “It is not the people al-Qaeda might kill that is the threat... Our reaction is what can cause the damage” (Fallows 2006, 62, emphasis in original). Topical humor consistently focused upon the United States’ reactions to 9/11 and exposed potential extreme actions as worthy of ridicule through a reliance on shared communal values, a practice undertaken in epideictic rhetoric.

The epideictic nature of topical humor should be of major interest to rhetorical scholars seeking to locate the imbrication of traditional values with current events. I have shown how national principles are reaffirmed and contested in the wake of a tragic event. While it took the passage of time and special sensitivity to the emotional and uncertain climate in the United States immediately after the attacks of 9/11, topical humor eventually returned to its customary reliance on communal values as a means to negotiate national identity through a contextualization of current events. But a rhetorical examination of topical humor also has the potential to expose national values as being prejudiced and/or perpetuating biases against groups of people. Some
examples of unsavory national values conveyed through topical humor in the year after 9/11 should illustrate the potentially negative side of communal principles.

A common topic that emerged in early 2002 related to the capture and detention of prisoners from Afghanistan. David Letterman made his first observation about the transfer of detainees from Afghanistan to Cuba on January 8, 2002: “The U.S. is re-locating prisoners from Afghanistan to Cuba. And if that doesn’t teach them, they’ll go to Hawaii” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track, 01/09/02). Letterman continued this line of humor on January 10: “Now they’re taking the Taliban prisoners over to Cuba and they’re going to put them down over there. The trip is so long they’re going to be sedated. Now, that’s not much of a punishment, is it? Drugs and a trip to the Caribbean?” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/11/01).

Letterman continued to frame these Afghani prisoners during his monologues. Additional quotations include that of February 1, 2002: “I got out my CBS contract and was looking over it. Technically, I’m not an employee, I’m a detainee” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/01/02); on February 5, 2002, “Not only did the Patriots win the Super Bowl, they are holding the Rams as detainees” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/05/02); on February 6, 2002, “Top Ten Complaints about Camp X-Ray” include “Three meals a day and none of them are goat” and “Have you seen the bathrooms? I’ve lived in caves with better facilities” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 02/06/02); and, on March 2, 2002, “‘Survivor 4’ premieres this week. That’s where they take these people to exotic locations, strap them down – no wait, that’s the detainees” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 03/02/02). Letterman hints at a controversy surrounding whether or not the people captured in Afghanistan are prisoners of war or detainees, a status that potentially allows for harsher interrogation tactics and longer periods of incarceration without access to legal counsel. Referring to himself as a detainee of CBS minimizes such a legal status, as does the
Super Bowl reference. Comparing Camp X-Ray to both a contemporary reality show and the caves inhabited by the Taliban and al Qaeda serves to diminish the harsh conditions faced by these detainees in Cuba.

Leno makes similar comments during this same time period: On January 15, 2002, “Good news and bad news for the airline industry. The good news is, planes are full. The bad news, they’re filled with al Qaeda prisoners going to Cuba. . . . On the plane they are bound, they are sedated, they are chained to their chairs. Or, as Continental calls it, coach” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/15/02); on January 16, 2002, “Amnesty International now says it is concerned about the harsh living conditions of Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners being held in Cuba. These people used to live in caves. They are now in the Caribbean in January” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 01/16/02); and, on January 17, 2002, “Some human rights groups are complaining that the al Qaeda detainees in Guantanamo Bay are being treated inhumanely. Oh please! They’re in the Caribbean in January, okay. You add some goats and sheep to the place, they’d think it was Temptation Island” (“The Hotline: Laugh Track,” 1/18/02).

Leno repeats the comparison of detainees with contestants on reality television shows that challenge their participants to live in harsh conditions for cash prizes, which serves to dismiss any allegations of harsh treatment, intimating that both are voluntary conditions. The specific comment about “Temptation Island” further suggests that animals may be a source of sexual temptation for the prisoners. Leno also references Amnesty International’s concerns about treatment of the detainees, although he dismisses the distinction between prisoners and detainees by referring to their previous life in “caves” and the fact that they are currently in a desirable location during winter. In sum, these comments are utterly dismissive of allegations regarding detainee abuse – or even that abuse could occur.
At the time, Leno and Letterman’s comments reflected what was known about people captured in Afghanistan as provided by the government and in the media. The prisoners were considered responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and so little mercy was forthcoming from U.S. citizens still reeling from the tragic events. This highlights how Leno and Letterman rely upon shared beliefs and values to craft comedic enthymemes. Both late night hosts assumed that their audiences believed these individuals did not deserve any comfort and that U.S. audiences felt superior to the Afghani prisoners, evidenced in comments about living in caves, as well as eating and being sexually attracted to goats.

This particular line of jokes diminished the importance of how enemy combatants were treated by the United States during a time of war, and we can perhaps attribute this lack of concern to the specter of 9/11 still looming large in the minds of most citizens. Topical humor has the potential to critique national actions, but it also can unreflectively perpetuate negative attitudes and beliefs. In these comments, Leno and Letterman rely on a sense of anger and superiority felt by U.S. citizens about individuals captured in Afghanistan, thus exposing national – if not racial and religious – prejudices. While some incongruities critique current events, they may also expose undemocratic actions and beliefs. This incongruity was probably not intended by Leno and Letterman, but a rhetorical reading of topical humor exposes positive and negative traits of national identity regardless of authorial intent.

The Onion also focused on the newly captured detainees in their ongoing feature, “What do you think” on February 6, 2002. This poll is a parody of public opinion polls, and this survey asked: “whether detainees in Cuba should be classified as POWs and protected under Geneva Convention laws” (The Onion 2002, 38:04). The fake responses included: “Goddammit, just when we finally get some prisoners, everybody wants us to be all nice to them”; “We need to
rough up these al-Qaeda guys a little if we’re ever going to get them to confess who the one true God is”; “This is a totally different situation. Those Geneva Convention laws were written back when we were fighting white people”; and, “I don’t think we should risk making martyrs of these men. Notice I said ‘martyrs’, not ‘quadriplegics’” (The Onion 2002, 38:04). Evidence of racism and religious intolerance is obvious here, as is an excitement about having a concrete enemy to physically punish.

The critical difference between The Onion and Leno and Letterman lies in the latter’s overt articulation of existing national prejudices. Because of this, The Onion not only presents a critical view of the treatment of detainees, but also condemns the prejudicial attitudes of U.S. citizens towards the detainees. These blunt comments are fake responses to a legitimate question and uncover the national and global superiority at the center of the controversy over the detainees, assumptions that are conveyed in Leno and Letterman’s comments. The Onion identifies the incongruity that the United States should follow the rule of law but is not doing so, and further exposes the national sentiment that the alleged perpetrators of 9/11 are not deserving of humane treatment because of their actions, as well as their nationality, religion and color.

Following in the tradition of Aristophanes, David Letterman, Jay Leno, and The Onion are our society’s comic guardians making observations about the state of the nation and the world. The national values that topical humor relies upon to create incongruities through the use of analogies, metaphor and irony can be critical, as in some of the examples contained within my core chapters, but they can also be unsavory, like the jokes made by Leno and Letterman about Afghani prisoners. The work of Lucy Caswell and of Martin Medhurst and Michael DeSousa examines the use of stereotypes in editorial cartoons. These authors highlight the fact that such shorthand can be an effective and concise means to involve an audience, not necessarily a means
to perpetuate negative beliefs. However, topical humor may also unreflectively rely upon prejudices as a means to construct comedic enthymemes, and such strategies may remain hidden absent rhetorical analysis. Paying more scholarly attention to the discourses of popular culture and how they both influence and reflect national identities would advance both rhetorical and public sphere studies.

Indeed, humor is not merely a rhetorical tool but must be considered a rhetoric in and of itself. In addition to its reliance on shared values in determining the appropriate objects of praise and blame, topical humor is also a democratic discourse due to its popularity, accessibility and the reciprocal relationship among producers and receivers of topical humor, which affords many opportunities for rhetorical scholars seeking to locate shifting attitudes relating to current events within the nation. Topical humor has consistently addressed current events dating back to the nation’s founding, which is a clear indication of the popularity of this discourse. But perhaps more importantly, the longevity of topical humor as a popularly consumed discourse provides rhetoricians with a large database of texts that reference changing attitudes and values in the nation with respect to a variety of important and mundane current events across time.

The accessibility of topical humor is also an important element that contributes to its democratic nature. As previously noted, the modes of transmission of topical humor have evolved over time from live performances to printed texts to radio skits to television shows to Internet websites. However, stand-up comedy is still performed and in some cases even televised (or can be found on the Internet) to reach a larger audience. The wide range of topical humor available for public consumption makes it likely that a majority of citizens are exposed to this discourse, making it a common text for the nation in content (current events) as well as
format. Topical humor’s diverse appeal to broad audiences and its negotiation of shared values make this discourse democratic.

The longevity and accessibility of topical humor in the United States makes it a unifying discourse for the nation. Not only does topical humor focus attention on contemporary matters of importance, but it also relies on shared values in an effort to ridicule people or events worthy of public censure. The process of ridicule is another democratic feature of topical humor in that average citizens are allowed to give voice to their disapproval on an almost daily basis. Whether or not agreement exists on the proper objects of ridicule can be immediately determined through audience responses: laughter indicates consensus, booing represents disagreement and silence conveys ambivalence. Audiences respond immediately, illustrating how topical humor relies upon both producers and receivers in order to create meaning and propriety.

A rhetorical examination of topical humor exposes the negotiation of values and attitudes over time as they correspond to specific events and/or people. This study has shown how these attitudes shifted during the relatively brief one-year period post-9/11 through an examination of topical humor as a rhetorical, democratic and unifying discourse capable of illuminating these changing values. Topical humor allows for the exposure of changing attitudes to emerge due to its epideictic nature and because it has been consistently produced and regularly consumed throughout the history of the nation. As such, future avenues of rhetorical scholarship and public sphere studies examining topical humor are limitless, ranging from historical work to contemporary issues. By identifying what values are privileged and how attitudes toward certain events change over time, scholars can discern what persuades and motivates people at any given time.
The more flawed or tragic the reality of a democracy, the more the nation requires the critical inquiry stemming from topical humor in order to obtain a skeptical yet hopeful attitude capable of encouraging acceptance and inspiring communal action, and in extreme cases, transcending national tragedies. The nation required emotional release and reorientation to a changed world after September 11, and topical humor provided both catharsis and transcendence. Topical humor was then able to critique the country’s reactions in an age of terrorism and to negotiate national values in relation to current events. Our comic guardians ushered us from a state of extreme emotions and anger, to one of grim acceptance of the existence of terrorism. The study of topical humor illustrates how and when the nation adapted to this changed world, and it continues to do so.

“Infotainment” in a Complex Register: Topical Humor’s Double Voice

While topical humor is similar to epideictic rhetoric in its reliance on shared values and determining the proper objects of praise and blame, this discourse is also distinctive in that it employs a double voice. The most essential duality of topical humor is that it must be both entertaining and informative. The other elements that I have outlined, such as persuasiveness and the articulation of shared values, need not be discerned in order for an audience to enjoy topical humor. However, topical humor must be entertaining. Indeed, the enjoyment of topical humor is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to enable a change in attitude or belief in audiences. Topical humor’s inherent structural duality makes it a distinct and complex form of rhetorical discourse. The use of the double voice also enables diverse audiences to enjoy topical humor, which furthers the democratic and unifying nature of this discourse discussed above.

An example of topical humor that works on multiple levels with audiences is the “George Bush is dumb” enthymeme discussed in Chapter 4. Both Democrats and Republicans can enjoy
jokes made at the President’s expense if they are funny and entertaining. However, those individuals opposed to President Bush’s political policies may experience a deeper satisfaction at mocking him in public, in addition to potentially constructing negative arguments against his actions in the future. Further, audience members who identify as Republicans may begin to weaken in their support of the President after repeated exposure to jokes relying on assumptions about Bush’s lack of intellect. Any of these potential readings are possible due to topical humor’s double voice.

The duality of topical humor can be evidenced in its use of intellect and emotion, imagination and reason, hope and skepticism, tragic and comic, past and present and present and future in topical humor. This double voice comes from the comic vision, which allows audiences to see comedy and tragedy simultaneously. The comic frame also traffics in duality by using a combination of intellect and emotion, imagination and reason. These dualities enable audiences to take a broad perspective on current events, a perspective that is both hopeful and skeptical. The complexity of topical humor stems from placing current events into context with communal values, which forces a continued negotiation of democratic principles in what must be considered an ongoing exercise of epideictic rhetoric in a double voice.

This underlying double voice is what enabled topical humor to address the tragedy of September 11 when other public discourses failed. There was a recycling of speeches on the anniversary of the terrorist attacks. For example “The Gettysburg Address” was read at Ground Zero in New York on September 11, 2002, which suggests a dearth of new discourse that responded directly to the attacks, even from a temporal distance of one year. But this study illustrates that topical humorists did not have similar failures, even though they did struggle and exercised caution immediately after the attacks. The use of a double voice and the inherent
dualities in topical humor make it an important public discourse that has continually addressed topics of importance throughout the history of the United States.

Topical humor can serve as an entertaining way to mock the news, produce a critical discourse and/or perpetuate negative stereotypes. Any of these options may be functioning concurrently for individual audience members. In each case, however, topical humor is a form of double-voiced epideictic discourse that allows for the continued negotiation of cultural values and national identity. Not only does topical humor rely upon shared values and beliefs, but the focus on current events also allows for this discourse to address matters of importance as a means to inform, entertain and persuade audiences about the proper attitude with which to view contemporary practices.

While many public sphere studies concentrate on countercultures or negative identity traits (Asen 2004, 192), topical humor is a discourse that seeks consensus concerning the appropriate topics of ridicule in relation to current events, traditional values and future actions. Further, the discourse of topical humor is accessible and sought out by average citizens, making it an ideal discourse for examination in public sphere studies. Habermas’ theorizations concerning the public sphere centered on venues such as salons and coffeehouses, locations that are no longer considered vibrant arenas for discussions on matters of civic importance. It is also limiting to locate democratic deliberations only in Congress. This is similar to reducing acts of citizenship to voting every two to four years. However, topical humor’s focus on current events makes it a productive discourse to track the focus and tenor of discussions taking place in the public sphere, discussions facilitated by comic guardians. Topical humor expresses common reference points in our increasingly diverse culture, and such a source of commonality is vital when initiating and engaging in discussions relating to matters of civic importance.
This examination has shown how topical humor negotiates a national tragedy in order to foster acceptance and adaptation in audiences. Citizens require information about matters of importance, and topical humor provides this information within a comic frame that is well suited to life in an often absurd and fragmented world. Scholars can discern the tenor of discussions relating to current events taking place in the public sphere through an examination of how values are invoked or transgressed in the discourse of topical humor. Topical humor is a unifying discourse because it focuses public attention on matters of importance. But topical humor is also a democratic discourse because it relies upon national values as a means to ridicule those in positions of power who abuse the trust of the people.

Topical humor is more than a form of entertainment; it is a discourse that informs and influences audiences about people and situations that require public scrutiny. The hopeful and communal attitude conveyed through the use of the comic frame also allows individuals to act together in the best interests of the community. The constant negotiation of values as they do or do not apply to changing circumstances allows topical humor to address exigent matters ranging from the tragic to the absurd to the mundane. The United States has a longstanding tradition of respecting comic guardians who fuse common sense with a sense of humor. A rhetorical examination directed at the production and reception of topical humor allows for a better understanding our shared past, present and future because of this discourse’s use of a double voice in a complex register.
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