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# “You Think I’m Joking”

## Examining the Weaponized Comedy of President Obama’s Stand-Up Addresses at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner

JAMES NIXON

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**ABSTRACT:** Satire and stand-up comedy are forms of cultural examination generally perceived as tools used by everyday citizens against the powerful and not by the powerful themselves. This article examines the less-analyzed side of stand-up comedy and satire as malleable instruments of cultural interrogation when employed by powerful agents such as President Obama. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and Henri Bergson’s concept of humor as a form of social corrective in my textual analysis of his stand-up addresses, this article interprets how Obama’s on-the-offensive, comically insulting addresses provided a unique way for him to attempt to normalize political criticisms and controversies, such as the “birther theory” and his administration’s drone program. In its interpretation of a substantial satirical and comic strategy within Obama’s stand-up addresses, this article reflects on the nature of modern satire and stand-up comedy and their complex relationship with forms of American power.

**KEYWORDS:** Obama, presidency, American comedy, satire, American humor, stand-up comedy, White House Correspondents’ Association dinner, drone program

In Washington there is no more serious business than being funny.

—Jeff Nussbaum

Satire is generally perceived as a tool that is used by everyday citizens against the powerful and not by the powerful themselves. It is a mode of cultural interrogation that critiques and questions the powerful, that can be traced back, as James Caron explains, to the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*, of satirists

speaking truth to power, or “punching up” to authority.<sup>1</sup> Satirical methods of critique complement the similar truth-telling reputation of stand-up comedy against authority, but dalliances between satire and stand-up have also come under examination in regard to their presumed disassociation from manifestations of power and authority, or their inevitably subversive nature.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Todd McGowan’s *The Barriers to a Critical Comedy* (2016) questions the assumption that comedy is self-evidently subversive in its disruption of everyday social norms as it tackles authority through political satire.<sup>3</sup> Here I examine the less-analyzed side of stand-up comedy and satire as malleable instruments of cultural interrogation when employed by a powerful agent such as President Obama, as well as how traditional comic theories such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and Henri Bergson’s conservative theory of laughter as a form of social corrective can be applied to these types of comic performance. I argue that Obama substantially redefined presidential stand-up performance by mocking and thus defusing prominent political criticisms of him and his administration through a sophisticated satirical strategy. I also consider how the tactics of his stand-up comedy work against political opposition, and I then examine his comic performances in relation to modern satire.

Obama’s addresses fit well within the lineage of the presidential comic address, particularly that of comic after-dinner speeches. Peter M. Robinson’s historical, extensive overview of the relationship between postwar stand-up comics and American presidents argues that the entwining relationship in turn influenced presidential rhetoric and performance and led many presidents to get “in on the act, perceiving the power of such humor to define, reinforce, and

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1 James E. Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness: Satire, Activism, and the Postmodern Condition.” *Studies in American Humor*, ser. 4, 2, no. 2 (2016): 153-81; 158.

2 Jonathan P. Rossing, “Critical Race Humor in a Postracial Moment: Richard Pryor’s Contemporary Parrhesia,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 25, no. 1 (2014): 16-33.

3 Todd McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy,” *Crisis and Critique* 1, no. 3 (2014): 200-221; 201, 202. For additional literature that challenges the idea that American stand-up comedy and satire is critical or subversive in their relation to authority, see Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 155-200, and Don Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor: The Problems with Crossing Comedy and Politics in Public Discourse,” in *Venomous Speech*, vol. 2, ed. Clarke Rountree (Westport, CO: Praeger, 2013), 299-316.

otherwise affect popular opinion."<sup>4</sup> A specific classification of Obama's comic ventures as a form of stand-up can be found in Don Waisanen's "Standing-Up to the Politics of Comedy," which categorizes modern American presidents as "expected to go beyond their State of the Union address and perform a stand-up comedy monologue to the nation."<sup>5</sup> In his historical overview of crisis-directed presidential joking at the Correspondents' Dinner, Waisanen notes that well before modern trends in political comedy broke down barriers between politics and entertainment, the dinner provided a crossing between the comic and political in which "presidents eventually became comedians," and presidents such as John F. Kennedy delivered "public, stand-up style monologues."<sup>6</sup> That Obama's comedy addresses can be defined as a form of stand-up is also supported by the fact that the popular media commonly referred to his performances as a stand-up address.<sup>7</sup> However, Obama's annual stand-up monologue can also be appreciated within the broader, more traditional analyses of presidential rhetoric, which has a bearing on matters of presidential self-definition integral to my arguments. In "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," David Zarefsky advances the proposition that presidential rhetoric can be understood through its management and definition of social and political reality.<sup>8</sup> If we view Obama's comic addresses as a distinctive form of public address

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- 4 Peter M. Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, the President, and the Performance of Political Standup Comedy in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 3.
  - 5 Don Waisanen, "Standing-Up to the Politics of Comedy," in *Communication and Language Analysis in the Public Sphere*, ed. Roderick P. Hart (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2014), 426-42; 426.
  - 6 Don Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief: Presidential Jokes as Enthymematic Crisis Rhetoric," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2015): 335-60; 341.
  - 7 "Obama's Last Standup: Correspondents' Dinner Gives President Final Chance to Zing Washington," CBC News, May 1, 2016, [www.cbc.ca/news/world/obama-correspondents-dinner-1.3560959](http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/obama-correspondents-dinner-1.3560959); David Wismer, "The 'Brilliant' Stand-Up Comedy of Barack Obama," *Forbes*, August 9, 2012, [www.forbes.com/sites/davidwismer/2012/08/09/the-brilliant-stand-up-comedy-of-barack-obama/#4b9d93675ee1](http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidwismer/2012/08/09/the-brilliant-stand-up-comedy-of-barack-obama/#4b9d93675ee1).
  - 8 As David Zarefsky argues, "Because of his prominent political position and his access to the means of communication, the president, by defining a situation, might be able to shape the context in which events or proposals are viewed by the public" ("Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 [2004]: 607-19; 611).

that bears out Zarefksy's argument, then the president's stand-up addresses and their varying associations with and disassociations from a typical presidential address set the basis for an analysis of them within a satirical foundation.

"Obama Out." As President Obama finished his last stand-up comedy address at the 2016 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, dropping the microphone to an ensuing mix of laughter and applause from the audience, a curtain fell on his considerable reshaping of this tradition.<sup>9</sup> The annual presidential stand-up comedy address at the dinner came to represent a popular aspect of American culture under his presidency. Stand-up comedy enjoys a prominent position at the Correspondents' Dinner, and the broadcasting of its annual presidential comic addresses is largely responsible for garnering the White House Correspondents' Association national and international recognition. Reflecting this, Obama's stand-up comedy routines proved to be easily among the most popular videos produced by the association, receiving tens of millions of views on websites such as YouTube. As *Politico's* Ben Smith and Gabriel Beltrone commented ahead of the president's address in 2010, the unique opportunity offered to the president to shape popular attitudes toward him and his administration through the popular public platform of the Correspondents' Dinner made the stand-up address "a crucial moment of presidential self-definition."<sup>10</sup> Smith and Beltrone go on to note that the presidents tend to answer the call to their annual comic duties because of "the unlikely, central role of the comic address in shaping the image of the president."<sup>11</sup> ABC News Radio's White House correspondent Ann Compton similarly remarks that presidents' stand-up comedy addresses are "far more defining" than any official addresses given during their tenure in the White House because "'we all remember the comedy."<sup>12</sup>

In his own management of this substantial cultural instrument, Obama definitively challenged the traditional form of the presidential stand-up address by departing from the self-deprecatory approach of his predecessors, with his performances at this event being defined by a strategy of going

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9 2016 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, C-SPAN, April 30, 2016, 40:00, [www.c-span.org/video/?407237-103/2016-white-house-correspondents-dinner](http://www.c-span.org/video/?407237-103/2016-white-house-correspondents-dinner).

10 Ben Smith and Gabriel Betrone, "Prep and Circumstance," *Politico*, April 30, 2010, [www.politico.com/news/stories/0410/36487.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0410/36487.html).

11 Smith and Beltrone, "Prep and Circumstance."

12 Smith and Beltrone, "Prep and Circumstance."

on the offensive with a satirical response. As *New York Times* Washington correspondent Mark Leibovich observes, President Obama treated his stand-up comedy duties as "something of a chore."<sup>13</sup> However, he also notes that be that as it may, these occasions also provided "a humorous outlet to say how he really felt" about certain issues, particularly with regard to the Washington press.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Obama could do so without the level of accountability he would face if he were similarly candid in official political channels. John Favreau reinforces this conclusion in his comments about drafting the president's remarks for the correspondents' dinner, arguing that there is typically less accountability attached to comic addresses than to standard presidential remarks. As he comments, "It's good to put in jokes that are really funny but not 'appropriate' for a politician to tell."<sup>15</sup> However, Obama's lack of self-deprecatory humor and his aggressive comic style elicited criticism from Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post*. Calling Obama "the Insult Comic President" in a response to his stand-up comedy address at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner, Farhi commented that for the second year running, Obama had broken with the "presidential punch line tradition" of inoffensive, self-deprecatory humor to go on the attack against opponents and allies alike.<sup>16</sup> Except for a mild joke pegged to his falling approval ratings, Obama mostly spared Obama during his fourteen minute stand-up routine.<sup>17</sup> *Politico's* Todd S. Purdum added weight to Farhi's criticism ahead of the president's appearance at the 2014 Correspondents' Dinner, observing that Obama's skilled comic timing, his satirizing of the absurdities of presidential life, and his delivery of scathing one-liners made him a formidable comic performer, "as long as the subject is someone else."<sup>18</sup>

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13 Mark Leibovich, *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral—Plus Plenty of Valet Parking! —in America's Gilded Capital* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 140.

14 Leibovich, *This Town*, 140.

15 Charlie Burton, "How to Give a Speech like Barack Obama," *GQ Magazine* (UK), September 2, 2013, [www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2013-09/03/president-barack-obama-best-speeches-jon-favreau-interview](http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/comment/articles/2013-09/03/president-barack-obama-best-speeches-jon-favreau-interview).

16 Paul Farhi, "For Obama, a Changed Tone in Presidential Humor," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2010, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/02/AR2010050203125.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/02/AR2010050203125.html).

17 Farhi, "For Obama, a Changed Tone in Presidential Humor."

18 Todd Purdum, "Barack Obama Laughs at but Not With," *Politico*, May 2, 2015, [www.politico.com/story/2014/05/barack-obama-106261.html](http://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/barack-obama-106261.html).

Ahead of the dinner in 2013, the *Daily Beast's* commentator and stand-up comedian Dean Obeidallah offered a similar appraisal of Obama's comic approach, noting that he "would make a great stand-up comic, not because he's the funniest president ever but because he uses jokes the same way many of us comedians do: as a weapon."<sup>19</sup> Obeidallah goes further, characterizing Obama's strategy as "weaponized comedy" and suggesting that this comic strategy is far more politically advantageous than the typical self-deprecatory humor of previous presidents' comedy addresses.<sup>20</sup> In his analysis of presidential comedy at the Correspondents' Dinner, Don Waisanen argues that the time between the Clinton administration and the Obama administration marks a period "in which the strategic use of enthymematic, crisis-directed humor has been amplified."<sup>21</sup> For instance, Mark Katz, principal comedy writer for President Clinton, remarks how Clinton wanted to utilize the comic opportunity of the Correspondents' Dinner to attack his enemies rather than go down the typical presidential route of self-deprecation, the latter being the comic approach he had tended to adopt under his presidency.<sup>22</sup> For example, in a joke planned for one of Clinton's Correspondents' Dinner stand-up comedy addresses, the president wanted to deliver a punch line stating that "all the [White House] correspondents are below average"—a reference to the Lake Wobegon effect. However, White House aides cut it out on the grounds that it was "too harsh."<sup>23</sup> A list of censored jokes from Clinton's stand-up comedy addresses released in May 2014 showed a similar pattern of comic expurgation.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Dean Obeidallah, "How Obama Has Weaponized Wit," CNN, March 22, 2013, edition.cnn.com/2013/03/21/opinion/obeidallah-presidential-jokes.

20 Dean Obeidallah, "Obama Will Weaponize Comedy at the White House Correspondents' Dinner," *Daily Beast*, May 2, 2014, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/02/obama-will-weaponize-comedy-at-the-white-house-correspondents-dinner.html.

21 Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief," 335, 337.

22 Jason Gay, "How Mark Katz Made Bill Clinton a Big Joke ... Haiku MTV! ... Too Much Rage, Not Enough Soy Sauce," *New York Observer*, September 13, 2000, observer.com/2000/09/how-mark-katz-made-bill-clinton-a-big-joke-haiku-mtv-too-much-rage-not-enough-soy-sauce.

23 Mark Katz, "Mirth of a Nation," *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2004, https://archive.is/xjoBO.

24 "Censored Jokes of the Clinton Files," *Politico*, May 1, 2014, www.politico.com/gallery/2014/05/censored-jokes-of-the-clinton-files/001797-025660.html.

President George W. Bush likewise tried to step outside a self-deprecatory strategy during his presidency but found that doing so did not always work to his advantage. One infamous example came at the 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner when Bush poked fun at the administration's fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction during his stand-up address, accompanying his jokes with a slideshow of photographs of himself looking for the weapons under furniture in the Oval Office. Bush quipped, "Those weapons of mass destruction [have] got to be somewhere," eliciting laughter and applause.<sup>25</sup> Reactions to this joke, beyond those of the audience at the Correspondents' Association Dinner, were largely negative and were regarded by some commentators as being in extremely bad taste.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps in response to media reaction, the Bush administration corrected its comic strategy six weeks later at the 2004 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner when Bush entirely avoided any laughable material about the war in Iraq in his address and devoted five minutes of his eight-minute performance to honoring American servicemen abroad.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, although Clinton and Bush used their stand-up addresses to confront and deflect a certain degree of popular political criticism, their respective administrations were far more cautious about doing so than Obama's. I argue that Obama's contribution to this period of crisis-directed comic addresses was markedly more on the offensive than that of Clinton and Bush, amounting to what Judy L. Isaksen identifies as "a more edgy comedy style, ... one that has social purpose."<sup>28</sup> Examples include Obama's tackling of the conspiracy surrounding his citizenship, Republican obstructionism, criticisms

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25 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner, C-SPAN, March 24, 2004, 30:00, 30:45, [www.c-span.org/video/?181100-1/2004-radio-television-correspondents-dinner](http://www.c-span.org/video/?181100-1/2004-radio-television-correspondents-dinner).

26 "Bush's Iraq WMDs Joke Backfires," *BBC News*, March 26, 2004, [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3570845.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3570845.stm); David Teather, "Bush Jokes About Search for WMD, but It's No Laughing Matter for Critics," *Guardian* (Manchester), March 26, 2004, [www.theguardian.com/world/2004/mar/26/usa.iraq](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/mar/26/usa.iraq); "Bush's WMD Joke Draws Criticism," *NBC News*, March 26, 2004, [www.nbcnews.com/id/4608166/ns/politics/t/bushs-wmd-joke-draws-criticism/#.VXGG8y\\_LfK4](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4608166/ns/politics/t/bushs-wmd-joke-draws-criticism/#.VXGG8y_LfK4).

27 2004 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, C-SPAN, May 1, 2004, 27:10-35:04, [www.c-span.org/video/?181634-1/2004-white-house-correspondents-dinner](http://www.c-span.org/video/?181634-1/2004-white-house-correspondents-dinner).

28 Judy L. Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-Rhetorical Humor: Rethinking Black Masculinities," *Howard Journal of Communications* 28, no. 1 (2017): 6-19; 10.



of Obamacare, his administration's drone program, his contentious relationship with the White House press corps, and critiques of Donald Trump, both as a celebrity and as a Republican presidential candidate. In his appraisal, Obeidallah indirectly reinforces Leibovich's "humorous outlet" idea, noting that stand-up comedy allowed Obama to use commentary to an unusual degree to redefine issues and challenge criticisms. As Obeidallah argues, "Sure it's comedy, but the barbs have messages embedded in them."<sup>29</sup> These commentaries suggest the pointed nature of Obama's stand-up-style speeches and open the way for examining how they addressed and deflected political criticisms, especially through their prominent use of satire. Given the significant power of self-definition the stand-up addresses provided Obama, the White House officials and speechwriters who prepared his speeches for the occasions did not take this task lightly. As noted by Obama's speechwriter and lead joke contributor, David Litt, in preparation for the Correspondents' Dinner, certain factions of the White House staff "who spend most of their lives writing about tax plans have to turn into the *Daily Show* writers room for a month."<sup>30</sup> Each year a number of White House officials, such as Favreau, speechwriters Jon Lovett (2009-11), Litt (2011-14), and senior advisor David Axelrod (2009-11)—as well as professional comedians and comic writers such as Stephen Colbert and Judd Apatow—helped prepare Obama's addresses.<sup>31</sup>

Among the issues that defined Obama's first term as president was the proliferation of right-wing alternative theories over his place of birth, popularized through the birther movement or "birtherism."<sup>32</sup> White House officials such as press secretary Robert Gibbs (2009-11) expressed his bemusement over these theories, dismissing them as "totally crazy."<sup>33</sup> In response to a

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29 Obeidallah, "Obama Will Weaponize Comedy at the White House Correspondents' Dinner."

30 Jesse David Fox, "What It Was Like Writing Jokes for President Obama," *Vulture*, April 21, 2017, [www.vulture.com/2017/04/writing-jokes-obama-white-house-correspondents-dinner.html](http://www.vulture.com/2017/04/writing-jokes-obama-white-house-correspondents-dinner.html).

31 Michael A. Memoli, "Making the President Funny at White House Correspondents Dinner Is Serious Work," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2015, [www.latimes.com/nation/politics/la-na-presidential-comedy-20150425-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/la-na-presidential-comedy-20150425-story.html).

32 Ben Smith and Byron Tau, "Birtherism: Where It All Began," *Politico*, April 22, 2011, [www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html).

33 Sunlen Miller and Jake Tapper, "Gibbs on Birthers' Theories: 'You Couldn't Sell This Script in Hollywood,'" ABC News, August 6, 2009, [blogs.abcnews.com/](http://blogs.abcnews.com/)

birther-related question during a White House Press briefing on July 27, 2009, Gibbs commented that even having to discuss "the made-up, fictional nonsense of whether or not the president was born in this country" within the "august" setting of the White House briefing room gave the theories more legitimacy than they deserved.<sup>34</sup> In the same setting, days after the release of his long-form birth certificate on April 27, 2011, Obama made the same point when he told the Washington press corps, "We do not have time for this kind of silliness. We've got better stuff to do."<sup>35</sup> The way the president responded to this theory was considerably different, however, when he addressed it via the comic mode of the Correspondents' Dinner.

Obama utilized this strategy in addressing the birther issue at both the 2010 and 2011 Correspondents' Dinners. Commenting on his fluctuating approval ratings at the 2010 event, he said, "It doesn't bother me. Besides, I happen to know that my approval ratings are still very high in the country of my birth."<sup>36</sup> In his response, he not only confronts the issue but comically alludes to the idea that he *was* in fact born abroad. The joke also cleverly and deliberately combines ambiguously serious and comic elements. Obama delivers the joke without breaking his presidential demeanor, staying straight faced throughout the delivery. Furthermore, the audience members affirmed their disapproval of birther theories by joining with him in satirizing them. The distinctly seriocomical elements in Obama's material reflect Caron's description of postmodern satire as "behaving like light at quantum levels, with a dual nature of being both serious and nonserious speech," a duality with the potential to affect real world behavior.<sup>37</sup> The capacity of the delicate seriocomical tone of Obama's satirical material to reshape and redefine issues such as the birther theory through the mode of stand-up comedy illustrates how presidents can use "counterfactual rhetoric," as Waisanen

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politicalpunch/2009/08/gibbs-on-birthers-theories-you-couldnt-sell-this-script-in-hollywood.html.

34 Press briefing, July 27, 2009, YouTube, July 27, 2009, 29:10, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=i953nlhyvSs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i953nlhyvSs).

35 "Obama Releases His Birth Certificate," NBC News, April 27, 2011, embedded video, 4:26, [abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/obama-releases-birth-certificate-13468322](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/obama-releases-birth-certificate-13468322).

36 2010 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, C-SPAN, May 1, 2010, 19:32, [www.c-span.org/video/?293275-1/2010-white-house-correspondents-dinner](http://www.c-span.org/video/?293275-1/2010-white-house-correspondents-dinner).

37 Caron, "The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness," 157.

puts it, within joking.<sup>38</sup> The material and its context are laughable, but it can be argued that Obama's use of this material speaks to developing notions of modern satire and its potential for social and political change.

At the 2011 Correspondents' Dinner, which took place after the White House had released Obama's long-form birth certificate in an attempt to definitively debunk the birther theory, Obama addressed the issue more extensively by once again employing a satirical conspiratorial strategy. After remarking on the recent release of this birth certificate, he declared that in order to put "all doubts to rest" over its authenticity, he would take a further measure: "Tonight, for the first time, I am releasing my official birth video."<sup>39</sup> Once again, a seriocomical tone comes into play. As Isaksen notes in her analysis of Obama's racial-rhetorical humor, Obama delivered the setup to this joke "with mock-serious facial expressions and his slow and measured cadence" in order to reinforce the punch line.<sup>40</sup> The "birth video," however, turned out to be the opening scene of Disney's *The Lion King* (1993) in which Simba the lion cub is crowned on the African plains, surrounded by all the animals of the kingdom.<sup>41</sup> Rather than seeking to quell right-wing suspicions, the video ironically confirmed theories of the president's African birthplace. After the video ended, Obama, in mock disappointment, testified to this attitude when he remarked, "Oh well. Back to square one."<sup>42</sup> Isaksen notes that the "official birth video" joke was the "most powerful comedic disruption" deployed by the president against birther advocates—most noticeably Donald Trump, who was sitting in the audience—because it used "their point of irritation—their fear of Africa—to do so."<sup>43</sup> Her analysis shows how Obama used on-the-offensive stand-up to celebrate his position as the first African American president and to contest "a manufactured and ritualized discourse of ideological fears that position[ed] him as a threatening outsider."<sup>44</sup> Using *The Lion King's* obvious and rooted fictionality provided

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38 Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief," 351.

39 2011 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, C-SPAN, April 30, 2011, 26:26, [www.c-span.org/video/?299256-1/2011-white-house-correspondents-dinner](http://www.c-span.org/video/?299256-1/2011-white-house-correspondents-dinner).

40 Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-Rhetorical Humor," 12.

41 2011 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, 27:27.

42 2011 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, 28:08.

43 Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-Rhetorical Humor," 12.

44 Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-Rhetorical Humor," 10.

a perfect means to challenge this narrative, and Obama's comparison of birtherism's ruminations to an animated children's movie complements Gibbs's rebuttal of the theory as "made-up, fictional nonsense."<sup>45</sup>

*The Lion King* joke emphasizes corrective elements in Obama's stand-up persona that evoke Henri Bergson's conservative theory of laughter, which maintains that humor acts inherently as a form of social corrective to adversarial behaviour.<sup>46</sup> Bergson notes that the pleasure caused by laughter implies "a secret or unconscious intent" of correcting opponents and criticisms and that in order for laughter to achieve this correction, it "must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed."<sup>47</sup> *The Lion King* joke additionally serves as an example of the ambiguity of the comic and serious elements of Obama's stand-up comedy addresses, a murky division he relied on for satiric effect. The president's candid and ironic acceptance of the birther theory within the contexts of his "approval ratings" and his "official birth video" satirized its conspiratorial suspicions. The use of fictional and nonfictional qualities in Obama's stand-up is underscored in Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh's analysis of the satirical videos produced and presented during Obama's Correspondents' Dinner stand-up addresses.<sup>48</sup> Their analysis of fictive and non-fictive qualities in these satires can be extended to the official birth video joke, whose presentation implies that for Obama, "there is no contradiction between valuing verified facts and the playful assertion of manifest falsehoods," a conclusion that Caron likewise argues propels the efficacy of satire: "The concept delivers its satiric punch line because it assumes that an audience still values truth."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, getting the joke demanded a broad cultural awareness among the members of the audience, a point that Nielson, Phelan, and Walsh emphasize in noting how the success of Obama's performances depends "on the ease with which he and his audience can move between the two kinds of discourse."<sup>50</sup>

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45 Press briefing, July 27, 2009, 29:10-23.

46 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914), 87.

47 Bergson, *Laughter*, 136.

48 Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," *Narrative* 23, no.1 (2015): 61-73; 61-62.

49 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," 62; Caron, "The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness," 162.

50 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," 62.

Employing a similar technique, Obama told the following joke at the 2012 Correspondents' Dinner, ostensibly accepting popular conspiratorial claims in order to ridicule them: "Now, this year, we gather in the midst of a heated election season. And [senior advisor David] Axelrod tells me I should never miss a chance to reintroduce myself to the American people. So tonight, this is how I'd like to begin: My name is Barack Obama. My mother was born in Kansas. My father was born in Kenya. And I was born, of course, in Hawaii."<sup>51</sup> After delivering this joke, President Obama gave a knowing wink to the audience, which erupted into laughter and applause. In this joke, Obama's performing a so-called acceptance of the birther theory is a further example of how he satirized its conspiratorial nature by comically acknowledging it. It demonstrates the "alternate frames" within the light-heartedness of the Correspondents' Dinner that Waisanen posits: the president's countering of the birther theory allowed him "to play within the boundaries of his opponents' reasoning—not simply *stating* his opponents' arguments but *performing* the punchlines as if he *were* them."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the joke's effectiveness is a function of its confirming the worst fears of birther advocates—that Obama was born abroad and is therefore not eligible to be president of the United States—but at the same time slyly ridiculing his opponents by ironically alluding to the claim of a foreign birthplace to the proestablishment ranks of the Washington press and liberal Hollywood elites. By implying a conspiratorial relationship among the political class and the Washington press corps and putting it in such a cartoonish light, Obama's satirical material not only helped deflect the theory but counterarguments as well. Drew Zahn of the right-wing, probirther American website *World Net Daily* responded to the joke the following day by arguing that Obama's wink was an invitation to the Washington press to join him in a joke against the American people by helping cover up his foreign birthplace.<sup>53</sup> Obama's mockery of the birther movement thus allowed him to directly challenge it but also had the potential to immobilize key elements of such right-wing theories. Zahn's pushback

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51 2012 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, C-SPAN, April 28, 2012, 22:53, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?305614-1/2012-white-house-correspondents-dinner>.

52 Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief," 351.

53 Zahn comments in the masthead of his article that President Obama's joke "invites reporters to join with him in joke on American people" ("Obama: 'I Was Born in Hawaii,' Wink, Wink," *World Net Daily*, April 29, 2012, [archive.is/VvyNt](http://archive.is/VvyNt)).

supports Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh's analysis of the unique effectiveness of fictionality in disarming one's opponents: because "the deployment of fictionality takes one's discourse into the realm of the nonfactual, its assertions cannot be directly contradicted."<sup>54</sup> The immunity provided by resorting to the fictional, they claim, means that "arguments and counter-arguments have to take place on other levels and with other forms of appeal than those based in facts and documented evidence."<sup>55</sup> This assertion is undoubtedly true with reference to Obama's "official birth video" joke because any direct refutation of the video invited mockery due to its clearly fictional quality. The satirical strategy of the birther material helped make the theory more untenable by using its own arguments against it in a comic mode, again illustrating the unique political and rhetorical potential within the president's stand-up comedy. The mock-conspiratorial tone of the material arguably deflated the potential for a counterargument because Obama's lampooning of the theory could hardly be construed as legitimizing it, since his rejoinder was so firmly rooted in satirical territory. If the theory was as fictional or silly as Gibbs and Obama argued, perhaps even comic, then engaging with it via his stand-up addresses could prove an effective way of deflecting it without tarnishing the dignity of the White House. In doing so, the White House recognized the necessity of embracing the birther theory through the comic mode of satire in order to delegitimize it.

That Obama's stand-up and its various satirical ploys were able to define major issues of his presidency was due in part to the theatrical suspension of typical press and political relations achieved through a comic mode, what Clinton's principal comedy writer Mark Katz characterizes as an "alternate reality," wherein "the President says all these funny things that he could otherwise never say in a million years."<sup>56</sup> From this angle, the unorthodox associations between the American press, the public, and the Obama administration within the theater of the Correspondents' Dinner can be understood in terms of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, which maintains that carnival's function is to work out, in a "half-real and half-play acted form, *a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to

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54 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," 69.

55 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," 69.

56 Gay, "How Mark Katz Made Bill Clinton a Big Joke... Haiku MTV!... Too Much Rage, Not Enough Soy Sauce."

the all-powerful, socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life.”<sup>57</sup> While Bakhtin argues that the “idiom” of laughter is “never used by violence and authority,” analyses such as that provided by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have countered this “false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression” by noting the potential for carnival elements to be as readily deployed by establishmentarian, conservative agents as by radical, subversive ones.<sup>58</sup> A similar critique is offered by Charles Byrd, who argues that Bakhtin’s theory of carnival neglects “humour’s service to ideological authority and the status quo.”<sup>59</sup> In addition, literary critic Umberto Eco argues that carnival’s subversive potential is constrained by its being separated from reality, which works to keep its moments of transgression, criticism, and reflections of power exclusively within the safety of a ritually comic sphere.<sup>60</sup>

Obama’s stand-up comedy can be explicated as a reflection of Eco’s analysis of “*authorized* transgression” found in the carnivalesque.<sup>61</sup> Obama—and by extension, the Correspondents’ Dinner—illustrates how a powerful agency can adapt carnival and employ its humorous and freeing qualities to affirm political power and to critique opponents within a comic sphere that lies outside of the realm to which they typically find themselves accountable. The comic behavior exhibited by Obama, channeled through what Eco typifies “as assuming a mask” of carnival comedy, ensured that he could commit transgressions “while remaining innocent.”<sup>62</sup> Codes that otherwise constrained presidential behavior were relaxed, and thus the degree to which he could be held accountable through remarks presented within a ceremonially sanctioned comic mode and space was likewise limited. However, Obama’s use of carnival in his annual stand-up comedy speeches to affirm

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57 Mikhail Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 8, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

58 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 90; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 14.

59 Charles L. Byrd, “Freud’s Influence on Bakhtin: Traces of Psychoanalytic Theory in *Rabelais and His World*,” *Germano-Slavica: A Canadian Journal of Germanic and Slavic Studies* 5-6 (1987): 223-30; 228.

60 Umberto Eco, “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York City: Mouton, 1984), 1-10; 3.

61 Eco, “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” 6.

62 Eco, “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” 3.



his power is also at odds with Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter as it has been traditionally understood.<sup>63</sup> Obama's weaponized stand-up showcases how carnival masking can be as readily deployed within an establishmentarian positioning as within a typically construed radical one. Thus, rather than liberating the powerless as Bakhtin envisages, the president's licensed satire emancipated the powerful.

However, there were limitations to what Obama was able to address in his stand-up performances; when he went too far, he incurred strong criticism. An infamous example is a joke from his address at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner: "The [teen pop band] Jonas Brothers are here [applause]. They're out there somewhere. Sasha and Malia are huge fans. But, boys, don't get any ideas [laughter]. I have two words for you: predator drones [laughter]. You will never see it coming [laughter]. You think I'm joking [laughter]."<sup>64</sup> Obama's drone joke was quickly met with criticism. The White House's decision to make a joke about a controversial (and at the time undisclosed) CIA program that had been vigorously promoted by the Obama administration was widely recognized as being in poor taste. As the *Atlantic's* Max Fisher points out, the inclusion of this joke—and the subsequent reaction it faced—proves that "some topics are a little touchy for even the most taboo-flaunting, back-slapping stand-up comedy routines."<sup>65</sup> *Salon's* Alex Pareene suggests that the joke would have perhaps been less offensive if it had come from anyone but Obama. As he notes, "It seems like a no-brainer that the people directly responsible for tragedies should not deliver jokes about those tragedies."<sup>66</sup> Although criticisms of the drone joke came predominantly from within online circles, *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter felt compelled to defend the joke two days later in an interview on MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*. After Olbermann pressed the point that the drone joke felt too "threatening" to be humorous, Alter countered, "It was a joke." In doing so, he was presumably trying to deny that the joke had a serious side, again reinforcing the perception that

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63 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11.

64 2010 White House Correspondents' Association dinner, 22:29.

65 Max Fisher, "Obama Finds Predator Drones Hilarious." *Wire*, May 3, 2010, [www.thewire.com/global/2010/05/obama-finds-predator-drones-hilarious/19789](http://www.thewire.com/global/2010/05/obama-finds-predator-drones-hilarious/19789).

66 Alex Pareene, "Obama Threatens Jonas Brothers with Drone Strikes," *Salon*, May 3, 2010, [www.salon.com/2010/05/03/obama\\_drone\\_joke\\_jonas\\_brothers](http://www.salon.com/2010/05/03/obama_drone_joke_jonas_brothers).



Obama's stand-up was structured by serious and nonserious elements.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Obama's body language as he delivered this joke exuded a careful balance between comical and serious tones. As he got ready to deliver the punch line of the joke, he lifted his head, fixing a steely eye to the audience. "I have two words for you: predator drones." Reacting to the burst of laughter from the audience and with his right hand held out as if in presidential declaration, he quickly delivered the next line of the joke. "You will never see it coming." As his posture straightened, he focused on the left side of the audience, waiting for the laughter to die down. Five seconds passed before he delivered the final line, turning his face back toward the podium, raising his eyebrows slightly and edging his mouth closer to the podium microphone, his gaze turning firm: "You think I'm joking." Keeping a stern look on his face as the crowd reacted, he shifted his gaze to his notes. Turning the page, he emitted a quick chuckle, barely audible against the fading laughter of the audience. This dalliance between a serious presidential tone and a comic attitude is complemented further by the ambiguity of the final line of the joke, a flawlessly tuned mixture of seriocomical elements that also characterizes Obama's other comic material. Alter's weak rebuttal did little to tide criticism of the joke, perhaps because so many of its critics recognized that its comic tone and satirical intent ineptly camouflaged a more serious side.

Certainly at close analysis, the same strain of political strategy at work in the president's stand-up comedy addresses that countered the birther theory can also be seen in the drone joke. The drone program was contested at a hearing of the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs three days before President Obama delivered his comic performance.<sup>68</sup> Although State Department legal advisor Harold Hongju Koh (2009-13) had laid out the government's first legal basis for the drone program approximately a month before the dinner, some commentators felt that it still occupied hazy legal territory.<sup>69</sup> As human rights lawyer Chris

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67 "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," MSNBC, May 4, 2010, [www.nbcnews.com/id/36936417/ns/msnbc-countdown\\_with\\_keith\\_olbermann](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/36936417/ns/msnbc-countdown_with_keith_olbermann).

68 "House Subcommittee Hearing Questions Legality of Drone Attacks," CNN, April 28, 2010, [edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/04/28/drone.attack.hearing](http://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/04/28/drone.attack.hearing).

69 Harold Hongju Koh, "The Obama Administration and International Law," US Department of State, March 25, 2010, [2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm](http://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm).

Rogers argued at the time, "Koh's mere assertions of the program's legality fail to provide the kind of accountability that is urgently needed."<sup>70</sup> With the program coming under increasing criticism from human rights organizations and congressional bodies in the weeks and months leading up to the Correspondents' Dinner, one can postulate that Obama's joke-writing team may have recognized that the dinner presented an opportunity for him to address the drone program for the first time in a presumably laughable fashion. *Politico's* Amie Parnes comments in an interview with Favreau that the team for the president's stand-up performance only began writing it days before the Correspondents' Dinner.<sup>71</sup> During this same week, *The New York Times* published an editorial written by senior fellow Peter Bergen and policy analyst Katherine Tiedemann of the think tank the New America Foundation that criticized the drone program and the Obama administration's questionable stance of "plausible deniability" with respect to the drone warfare recorded in Pakistan.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the American Civil Liberties Union penned a letter to Obama voicing its "profound concern" about the increasing use of drones.<sup>73</sup> In addition to Favreau and Lovett, the other members of the speechwriting team were National Security Council spokesperson Tommy Vietor and *Daily Show* writer Kevin Bleyer.<sup>74</sup> Vietor's inclusion in the writing team is particularly relevant given the National Security Council's very prominent and controversial role in the drone program in early to mid-2010.<sup>75</sup> His participation and the prominent coverage that the

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70 Chris Rogers, "Are Drone Strikes Legal? Koh Offers Assurances, Not Answers," *Huffington Post*, April 3, 2010, [www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rogers/are-drone-strikes-legal-k\\_b\\_524115.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rogers/are-drone-strikes-legal-k_b_524115.html).

71 Amie Parnes, "Jon Favreau on Obama's WHCD Success," *Politico*, May 3, 2010, archive.is/Y2Zer.

72 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "No Secrets in the Sky," *New York Times*, April 25, 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/04/26/opinion/26bergen.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/26/opinion/26bergen.html).

73 "House Subcommittee Hearing Questions Legality of Drone Attacks"; American Civil Liberties Union, "ACLU Letter Urges President Obama to Reject Targeted Killings Outside Conflict Zones," April 28 2010, [www.aclu.org/human-rights-national-security/aclu-letter-urges-president-obama-reject-targeted-killings-outside-co](http://www.aclu.org/human-rights-national-security/aclu-letter-urges-president-obama-reject-targeted-killings-outside-co).

74 Parnes, "Jon Favreau on Obama's WHCD Success."

75 Shane Harris, "Administration Says Drone Strikes Are Legal and Necessary," *Atlantic*, March 26, 2010, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/03/administration-says-drone-strikes-are-legal-and-necessary/38080](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/03/administration-says-drone-strikes-are-legal-and-necessary/38080).

Obama administration was facing in the week-long writing period from the *Times*, the ACLU, and Congress would have provided the impetus needed for the drone program to be added to the “list of topics they wanted to cover” in Obama’s stand-up comedy address.<sup>76</sup>

The intensely disputed legal and moral ambiguities of the drone program that stoked so much protest mirror the ambiguities of intent, seriousness, and interpretation within the genre of stand-up comedy used by the White House’s writing team to confront and defuse protests surrounding the program. Some of the criticisms against the drone program targeted the semiofficial, semicovert manner that administration officials used in discussing it, with Micah Zenko writing a month before the 2010 Correspondents’ Dinner that it was “remarkable that the Obama administration maintains the false notion that such operations remain secret and are therefore beyond public debate.”<sup>77</sup> The ambiguity of the drone program is thus equally matched by the ambiguities of the president’s stand-up comedy performances. Neither entirely within or outside the political, they exist in an intermediate state between reality and fiction, certainty and uncertainty, accountability and nonaccountability. Positioned between the political and the comic, they reflect Caron’s emphasis on satire’s intermediary position between serious and comic political speech.<sup>78</sup> In this way, the comic and the political found an opportune match; the president could trivialize protests over the drone program in an unofficial (comic) capacity, have his remarks inserted into the public record on the matter, avoid accountability by avoiding traditional (and potentially problematic) political territories, all with the intention of normalizing an increasingly controversial government program. As much as Zenko hoped that the program could be demystified by being brought out of the shadow of government confidentiality, the writing team’s insertion of the drone joke privileged the needs of the Obama administration, cushioning public knowledge of the program within a stand-up-comedy-style speech, a style of performance ripe with possibilities for negotiations between fictive and nonfictive properties and crisis-based deflection. As Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh argue, fiction and fictive discourse are used by speakers such as

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76 Parnes, “Jon Favreau on Obama’s WHCD Success.”

77 Micah Zenko, “Demystifying the Drone Strikes,” *Washington Times*, April 2, 2010, [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/02/demystifying-the-drone-strikes](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/02/demystifying-the-drone-strikes).

78 Caron, “The Quantum Paradox of Truthiness,” 164.

Obama "to negotiate their relations with actual states of affairs"; this form of communication is a continuously negotiated flux between actual and non-actual expectations, arguments and attitudes.<sup>79</sup> The comic negotiation carried out by Obama's drone joke is an example of this type of communication, whose goal was to trivialize growing concerns over the program. The stand-up performance thus once again raised questions of satire's use as a tool to redefine social and political expectations and assumptions.

However, the inescapably dark nature of the joke was its core failing and highlights characteristics of the Bergsonian notion of laughter's corrective function within the president's aggressive style of stand-up. In his analysis of the mechanisms of Bergsonian correction, James K. Mish'alani notes that "laughter as a symbolic act is a replacement; it stands in for or is done instead of some other act which remains suspended, unfulfilled."<sup>80</sup> What laughter represents is a kind of threat, but a threat confined within a mode of comic art that suggests it acts as a "social gesture."<sup>81</sup> This representational quality, Mish'alani argues, has a disciplinary function, namely, that of "acting out of a semblance of assault" through laughter, a function clearly seen in Obama's drone joke.<sup>82</sup> As Mish'alani contends, the function of warning that a joke performs "rests precisely on this representational character . . . for all threatening behaviour, as gestural, is mock action."<sup>83</sup> However, Bergson's "threat of correction" at the heart of laughter's function, even with what Mish'alana characterizes as its power of comic insurance through laughter's capacity for "endless retractions" and "deflections," is more limited in the grave context of the Obama administration's drone program.<sup>84</sup> If, as he argues, "the representation of harm is there only to be negated" via disciplinary humor, it is difficult to separate Obama's joke from the actual threats made by his administration in its deployment of the drone program. This gap is especially noticeable when one considers that in early 2010 the president was reported to have "placed himself at the helm" of the approval and management of

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79 Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, "Ten Theses About Fictionality," 66, 63.

80 James K. Mish'alani, "Threats, Laughter, and Society," *Man and World* 17, no. 2 (1984): 143-56; 149.

81 Bergson, *Laughter*, 20; Mish'alani, "Threats, Laughter, and Society," 150.

82 Mish'alani, "Threats, Laughter, and Society," 150.

83 Mish'alani, "Threats, Laughter, and Society," 149.

84 Bergson, *Laughter*, 135; Mish'alani, "Threats, Laughter, and Society," 152.

its ever-expanding “kill list” of designated targets.<sup>85</sup> In a similar vein is Waisanen’s conclusion on the possible limitations of presidential joking: “When it comes to those at the highest echelons of power, associations of real or perceived violence beg more sensitivity than personal crises.”<sup>86</sup> The rhetorical, comic difficulties of the joke further suggest that this material’s inherently deadly associations with the reality of the drone program limits, if not entirely demolishes, any potential to expand and sanitize the program through comic interpolation, thus contrasting it with the counterfactual “official birth video”—and by extension, counterfactual Obama (i.e., the Kenyan-born, illegitimate president). Nonetheless, the joke allows for an interpretation that behind the satirical material of the president’s stand-up comedy addresses there are serious strategies at play.

In his appraisal of Obama’s weaponization of comedy, Obeidallah acknowledges the effectiveness of confronting criticisms via a stand-up comedy address, commenting that “there’s nothing more effective—and satisfying—than causing a room full of people to laugh at your opponents or their views.”<sup>87</sup> Obeidallah’s commentary resonates with particular aspects of humor theory, specifically that of Bergson’s conservative theory of laughter. Obama’s satiric dismissal of the birther theory and criticisms of his administration’s clandestine drone program only further enforces this corrective function; it can be argued that the underlying satirical strategy of confronting and trivializing these issues in the comic space of the Correspondents’ Dinner was to make it more difficult for opponents to issue counterarguments. Obama’s drone joke is particularly amenable to interpretation in terms of Bergson’s concept of laughter’s major purpose as one that seeks to “intimidate by humiliating.”<sup>88</sup> Obeidallah and Bergson’s commentaries on the power of comic speech to silence adversarial opinion are borne out by interpretations of Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses that highlight

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85 Bergson, *Laughter*, 135; Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society,” 152; Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html).

86 Waisanen, “Comedian-in-Chief,” 354.

87 Obeidallah, “Obama Will Weaponize Comedy at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner.”

88 Bergson, *Laughter*, 198.

their more strategically political intent. Additionally, both Obeidallah's and Bergson's ideas reinforce my argument about the malleability of stand-up comedy as a cultural form that can be used to assist political power by addressing popular political criticisms. In the potential fusing of personal, political, and cultural tensions that defined the drafting of Obama's stand-up comedy material, a more sophisticated framework for understanding the way his administration confronted prominent controversies and conspiracy theories emerges.

Obama's weaponizing of his comic routine at the Correspondents' Dinner allows this fusion that recognizes, courts, and affirms the power circles of Washington DC to be achieved through a generous use of satire. Obama found a distinctive freedom in performing within a comic mode, stepping skillfully between realms of accountability and nonaccountability, joviality and seriousness, and fiction and reality. His stand-up comedy addresses exemplified a skillful traversing between the limitations and hindrances of the commander-in-chief and the more liberating and less answerable role of comedian-in-chief. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson argue that "by comically playing with the political, one can gain a greater sense of ownership over it and, in turn, feel more empowered to engage it."<sup>89</sup> I contend that an opposing position is established in President Obama's stand-up comedy addresses. By playing politically with the satirical, powerful agents such as Obama feel more empowered to engage with these laughable modes of speech and use them to attempt to normalize or deflect challenging criticisms and affirm their own political power.

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89 Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, "The State of Satire, the Satire of State," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3-36; 11.

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