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"Jokes and Politics: The Power of Leaders' Humor"

Michael Alan Krasner, Ph.D.
Co-Director, Taft Institute for Government
makrasner@gmail.com

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Making Democracy Work

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Humor is a human universal; all peoples laugh and most tell jokes. In politics, humor's power to undermine authority is widely recognized (Webb, 1981, Paletz, 2002). George Orwell says, "Every joke is a small revolution," (Orwell, 1945) and satire, political cartoons from Daumier to Nast to Herblock, stand-up comics, and late night tv monologues-all follow this pattern.

But political humor works to support leaders as well (Webb, 1981, Powell, 1988, Berger, 1993). American politicians recognize the power of humor; they hire joke writers to improve their speeches. (Gardner, 1989: 74; 1994: 18,21; Katz, 2003) Commentators recognize this power and often discuss the way a joke or quip "defused" a potentially difficult situation. Yet the power dynamics of jokes and laughter, especially this defusing power, have gone largely unexplained, whether in the literature on power or the literature on humor. (In his discussion of political humor, mainly dedicated to categorizing humor by its effects, David Paletz notes perceptively in one sentence that self-deprecating humor, especially by patrician politicians, helps to "display their common humanity with the electorate." (Paletz, 2002))

This article applies the model set forth by Murray Edelman (Edelman, 1967, 1985, 1988) to analyze how and how and why jokes affect power relations, in particular, the ways in which humor may protect a leader by affecting public perception. As Edelman argues that settings and language and the persona of a politician influence uninitiated people at a level different from that

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of rational argument, so, this article asserts, humor has similar effects for similar reasons. The

argument here differs from Edelman's in contending that humor may have effects not only on those generally considered untutored in politics--the general public, for want of a better term--but also on "insiders," especially journalists, for reasons to be specified later.¹

Humor falls into the category of symbolic reassurance because it affords leaders the opportunity through manipulating words and transforming their own public personas to provide audiences with emotional satisfaction, to neutralize potentially embarrassing or damaging situations, and to do all of this without spending any political resources, without shifting any material goods, and without changing their own behavior.

Thus, humor achieves symbolic reassurance in a remarkably efficient fashion. For reasons that will be elaborated below, even a mediocre joke often has very strong effects, effects beyond what any other words could produce, on journalists and on the general public. Control and reassurance are achieved through the play of humor on emotions.

Often, humor's reassurance occurs without the need for elaborate staging (such as President Ronald Reagan's heroic stance at the Demilitarized Zone in Korea (Hertsgaard, 1989, 24-25) or the need to use impressive settings, or arcane language (Edelman, 1985, 95ff, 114ff.). It is nearly always common language, even (or, especially) colloquialisms and an informal manner that conveys humor most effectively.

Two examples: John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Ronald Reagan in 1984

Two examples will illustrate the analysis. In the 1960 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination John F. Kennedy faced accusations that his family's wealth, deployed by his ambitious father, was being unfairly used against his opponents, particularly Hubert Humphrey. In the campaign in West Virginia and later in Washington before the national press

corps, Kennedy began to respond with humor. At first he made a simple statement about his father being too cheap to pay for a landslide, but then he elaborated the joke and added a prop as follows. "I have here a telegram from my father," he said, and pretended to read. "It says, 'Dear Jack, Don't buy one more vote than you have to. I'll help you with this election, but I'll be damned if I pay for any landslide. (Loughry, 2007, Kessler, 1996)'" The humor proved effective, and the issue faded from the media (and public) agenda.

Twenty-eight years later, in the first of three televised presidential debates, Ronald Reagan, anointed as the "Great Communicator," and a heavy favorite against former vice president Walter Mondale, stumbled badly. He appeared generally ill at ease, while Mondale was relaxed and almost jovial, noting that he personally liked the president as anybody would. Reagan seemed at a loss for words when answering questions. Even his presumably well-rehearsed closing statement was halting and barely comprehensible. Media accounts raised the issue of Reagan's age, which he had joked about for years. Mondale seemed to have found the one chink in Reagan's peace-and-prosperity armor that might tighten the race.

Predictably, a journalist raised the issue in the second debate. Reagan responded with, "I have decided not to make age an issue in this campaign. I will not exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." The audience burst into laughter; so did the questioning journalist. Mondale grimaced and then joined in. The danger had been met, the issue blunted, the threat dissolved.

To further assess the impact of this quip, I reviewed the campaign coverage in U.S. News & World Report, Time, Newsweek and the Washington Post for the period beginning before the first debate and ending with the election. In the three newsweeklies the issue of age

was prominent in the coverage between the first and second debate and nearly entirely absent afterwards, except for stories indicating that the issue had been settled for good in Reagan's favor. In the Washington Post, the coverage was more mixed. References to the age issue, at least a broadly construed version of it, occurred before the debates and persisted afterwards in editorials, columns, and in news stories, but the columnists and editorial writers were mainly protesting that the issue should not have been settled, while conceding that it had.

No doubt the generally improved Reagan performance contributed mightily to this result, but the joke was a key element, as several reporters and columnists noted. Nothing else would have been as sharply decisive. To understand how this effect is achieved, the next section will discuss how a joke works to defuse an issue, putting the discussion in the context of some of the literature on jokes and humor. A subsequent section presents the detailed review of the media coverage of the 1984 episode.

Humor and Power: The Underlying Power Relations

How does humor achieve its effects? How does it leapfrog argument and persuasion to change attitudes in a way that in retrospect seems almost magical? In the analysis that follows I will argue that humor works along two dimensions—that it allows a leader to control the immediate social situation and that it allows the leader to influence decisively the audience's perception of the potentially damaging issue that is at stake. As the detailed discussion will indicate, these aspects overlap in practice, but are most clearly discussed separately.

Social Control

In general terms a joke or witty remark allows the speaker to gain control of the immediate social situation in several ways: it focuses attention on the speaker and puts the

speaker on the offensive, even perhaps beyond accountability. It puts the joke teller in the superior position of knowing something the rest of us don't know (what we will "get" when the joke is told. Fourth, it makes the speaker the benevolent dispenser of relaxation and laughter, which replaces burdensome tensions and unpalatable duties.

Social Control: Focusing Attention – Taking the Offensive

A moment's reflection will confirm the pattern by which attention focuses on the successful joke teller. Anyone who says in a group, "I have a joke," becomes the center of attention. Anyone who tells a joke successfully or makes an unannounced witty remark is the focus of *appreciative attention*.

Further, any (successful) political use of humor puts the user on the offense, because it elevates to a position of benevolent superiority. In the situations to be analyzed, the leader is potentially or actually on the defensive, accused or suspected of wrongdoing or incapacity and to remain on the defensive would be damaging or fatal. By establishing themselves as the center of attention and taking the offensive, the leader prepares to reassert control and re-establish deference as the next section analyzes in detail.

Social Control: Reasserting Leadership. Re-establishing deference

When a politician makes a successful joke, she becomes the one in control. **She** makes **us** laugh. The implication is that he can also take control of other pressing issues. She can master them as he has mastered this one. In social terms, he can master other potential adversaries as he has mastered the contentious journalists, the presuming adversaries, and us, the general public.

Further, she masters us by being enough like us or understanding us well enough to make us

laugh, so she is either a person of the people or someone who understands the people and thus can serve their interests. Finally, she offers the gift of laughter, a good time. He is thus powerful, superior, blessed with the common touch, and generous.

Consider Kennedy's joke or Reagan's joke in more detail; what does it enable him to say? First, I can joke about this. I don't have to be defensive. I don't have to justify my actions. I don't have to account to you, the reporters, and by extension to the people. I can rise above this, using humor to do so. I can reaffirm my status as the natural leader, the aristocrat, the prince, the one you admire for grace under pressure and to the devil with the issue that created the pressure in the first place.

Instead of some sort of labored, rational justification that only serves to call attention to the issue and to offer a further target for attack (If the candidate offers figures, were they accurate? If he gives a reason, is it a good reason?) the joke offers the audience a chance to join the powerful figure in dismissing the whole notion that this issue should be taken seriously.

"I am rising above this," Kennedy said in effect. "Won't you come, too? Won't you join me in recognizing that my success is foreordained, blessed by the gods? Won't you join me in transcending these petty objections, these unseemly quibbles about money? And won't you join me in having a good time, with the promise of many more to come, many more good times created by me, if you'll just give up these pettifogging, nit picking, boringly over-serious moralistic attitudes?"

Similarly, Reagan says, "You've been worrying about my age. You want to know if I've got all my faculties. Well, let me prove it to you, not with a boring recitation of facts and figures, but with a joke. That'll show you that my sense of humor is intact. More important, it

demonstrates that I'm in command of this situation. After all, I'm relaxed and I just made everybody, including my opponent, laugh, and I sure took the wind out of that solemn reporter's sails."

Social Control: The Language of Laughter and the Helplessness of Laughter

Even the words we use to describe such situations convey power relations. For example, "He made us laugh." He **made** us laugh. He was in control. He was the active agent. We were the ones acted upon. By his action he produced the reaction he desired in us. Further, isn't laughing itself a kind of involuntary reaction, that is, a reaction controlled by someone else? Isn't that why we use the word "make?" At its extreme laughter is called helpless laughter, laughter that goes on and on uncontrollably, laughter that we cannot stop. But there is a degree of helplessness at every level. "She tried unsuccessfully to keep a straight face." "I couldn't help laughing." When we laugh, we give up a degree of self-control.

Wallace Chafe (1987) points out that laughing is incapacitating physically and psychologically. When you are laughing you cannot do pushups, light a candle, or work a crossword puzzle. Further, this state of incapacity is enjoyable. Chafe summarizes his observations thus

and psychologically it diverts attention to it

the humor state you can't act effectively, and you like it." (Chafe, 1987, 21)

Considering the function of such a state, he makes an even more intriguing argument:

The humor state arises in us [as part of the evolution of the species] in the first instance in order to keep us from doing things that would be counterproductive. The things it keeps us from doing are things that our natural, schema-based human reasoning might lead us into, but which, given the larger reality of a particular situation, would be undesirable, bad, or sometimes even disastrous. In essence, humor is the safety valve that saves us from the consequences of our natural reasoning when it would get us into trouble.

Another way to say this is that humor is an adaptive mechanism whose function is to keep us from taking seriously those things that we ought not to take seriously. (Chafe, 1987, 18)

In other words, humor and the resulting laughter sometimes function to get us to avoid what should be avoided, not to take seriously what shouldn't be taken seriously. "Laughing to keep from crying" is one variation on this theme. It refers to a situation so painful that it cannot be taken seriously because it would be incapacitating. The only point that need be added is that A politician (or anyone else) may use humor to convince the rest of us that we should not take something serious even when we should. The result is exactly that achieved by Kennedy and Reagan: to settle an issue favorably without dealing with its substance.

Social Control: Tension relieved: the power dimension between politicians and journalists

It is commonplace of the analysis of humor that it relieves tension. (Lyttle, no date) In the political setting, the effect is multiplied, because of the implications of conflict that the tension carries. In the case of Kennedy in West Virginia, it is not simply the tension between the norms of fair play or the legal norms and Kennedy's family money that is at stake. The reporters are supposed to pursue those issues, raise those questions. Yet there is inevitably tension in . doing so, partly the social tension that comes from antagonizing people with whom one has daily contact. (Gans, 1980, 132) In Reagan's case the social tension is increased by the need to directly question the competence of the president who is also an older man.

More important is the inherent conflict of interest that Leon Sigal (1973) and others have described so well. On the one hand, the reporters are supposed to pursue issues, especially issues that involve corruption. On the other hand, they depend upon the candidate's good graces for

stories. They need access. So, the tension is doubled and redoubled. (Gans, 1980, 132-136)

Finally, reporters may be affected by the general norm that deference be paid to the only nationally elected political leader who is also the ceremonial national leader and hence the symbol of national unity. At its extreme this tendency is reflected in Dan Rather's well known post-9/11 invitation to the President (since retracted) to simply tell him, "where to line up."

Hence, the enormous and (welcome) power of a joke that defuses the tension and obviates the need to press the issue, that gives the reporters an out. And with the reporters, the public, too, or at least that proportion of the media and the public not so pig headed, not so literal, not so rigid as to persist in the Puritanism that would be (in the newly created context) the only possible reason to continue raising these awkward questions.

There are further points with regard to the public. They too have mixed feelings about political leaders. They want strong leaders, but they mistrust politicians. These jokes allowed the public to believe in a leader. They relieved the tension associated with considering and deciding difficult questions: Is Kennedy really only a puppet manipulated by his father or is he someone in whom I can believe? Is Reagan, our president, a little past it? Has he still got all his marbles? Should I be worried about his being in charge of our nuclear weapons? Avoiding these questions by returning to deference relieves considerable tension.

Then, too, when the prince deigns to joke, when the prince jokes at his own expense, who among the commoners will be so boorish as to persist in questioning his putative majesty on the particulars of the now trivialized subject at hand?

Social Control: Repressed Material

Freud's idea of humor as a means of expressing repressed materials also applies to these jokes. (Freud, 1960) In his analysis, sex and aggression are the two main categories.

Aggression suits our situations: surely, a leader or would-be leader under criticism or scrutiny would like nothing better than to eradicate his questioners. The norms of American politics most often make this a poor strategy. To reassert power and superiority a joke becomes a welcome substitute, especially because the aggression is concealed in laughter and transformed into what appears to be its opposites-good fellowship and generosity.

Ridicule is the more direct humorous expression of aggression. Reagan tried it in 1984 and it did not work for reasons elaborated below. In general terms, it may be too obvious a strategy. More specifically, it fails in and of itself to assert superiority and command by demonstrating a relaxed, confident, knowing approach. The successful joke does all of this as did Reagan's in 1984 and JFK's in 1960.

Social Control: Laughing in a Crowd/Creating Legitimacy

When we laugh in a crowd, we affirm the need/reason for the laughter. If all of us are laughing, then it must have been a funny joke or remark, that is, we must have had a good reason. Further the person who told the joke must have told it well (or well enough), and must, in addition, be given credit for knowing the joke that we did not know, or seeing the funny relation we did not see, and for choosing to tell it (or reveal it) at the right time and place. Most important, the person telling the joke or making the witty remark must be given credit for taking a risk, a risk that succeeded in giving her control of the situation. Had the joke failed, the opposite would have been true. Implicitly, we as a group confirm the legitimate power of the person telling the joke or making the witty remark.

As noted earlier, laughter creates a temporary unity in the audience and a hierarchical relation with the joke maker who establishes by the reaction not only the control, but also the right to control. If not, why are we all laughing? Thus, the elicited behavior influences the perception.

Conceptual Control: Redefining the Situation

As the discussion above indicates, the leader's successful joke also works by redefining the situation to the leader's advantage. The leader influences the choice of schema by which the journalists and the wider public perceive the situation. Those who join in the laughter acquiesce in the new definition.

The work of three acute analysts helps us to understand this process. Chris Powell (1988), Ronald Webb (1981) and Ted Cohen (1999) all note that a successful joke creates social unity through common perception; but all three omit a crucial power dimension.

In discussing humor as a controlling response to deviance and a support for the powerful, Powell writes, "In some important sense humor can be equated with intelligence tests. To get the joke and to respond appropriately demonstrates one's social competence, one's grasp over and understanding of the way things are."

How powerful then to be the one who sets the test, and the terms of the way things are. In our cases there is potentially a deviating situation or behavior. The politician – the would-be or incumbent president – may be exposed as a cheat or an incompetent. Humor defeats these threats by posing a test of definition which if answered in the terms presented erases the threat. The test 4 asks, as noted above, "Should the leader be scrutinized by the underlings for matters that should not even be taken seriously?" The correct answer is laughter. By laughing, the

audience accepts the implicit frame that supports the leader and rejects the threatening frame. The issue can then be dismissed.

Ronald Webb (1981) makes a similar analysis, arguing that "Conservative humor corrects, by the ridicule and degradation of directed laughter, a faulty expression of a role." He offers the example of students laughing at a professor who proposed to teach a class in the nude or the public laughing at President Ford falling while leaving an airplane. In both cases the laughter serves to remind those laughing of a norm to which the person being corrected should adhere. In both cases, "There is a kind of subtle agreement among those laughing(having successfully spotted the deviance) that they are in some way privy to the correct answer, to the rules of role behavior or social norm being violated." In our cases the journalists, and the rest of us, are returned to the proper role of deferential and respectful subordinates.

In a similar vein, Ted Cohen presents the following analysis of the dynamic underlying successful jokes (Cohen, 1999, 25): "[a] deep satisfaction in successful joke transactions is the sense held mutually by teller and hearer that they are joined in feeling." Cohen calls this a "community of appreciation." (27) I would extend this analysis to include the creation of a community of appreciation not just for the joke, but for the joke teller. More specifically, both jokes invite the listeners, especially the journalists, to join or rejoin a community of deference to the joke-teller.

Note, however, that all three formulations assume an unambiguous situation-a clear case of deviance, a well-defined role, one possible community of appreciation. As I have suggested, the more interesting situations are those in which roles and definitions of device may be contested.

To put the matter in Cohen's terms, the essential point, which is not part of Cohen's otherwise splendid (and funny) argument, is that there are always more than one possible community of feelings into which a joke might draw the listeners. (Similarly, there is usually more than one dimension to a role and the relations among roles) Cohen bases his notion of community on the idea of shared knowledge essential to understanding and appreciating the joke-"a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences, et cetera-a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook." (28) The second constituent is a shared feeling-a response to something such as a joke.

This two-part analysis is undoubtedly true, but omits the crucial elements of diversity and selection, and thus of power. The first constituent set of beliefs has within it many possible schemas for evaluating a particular event, person, circumstance, or issue. In a familiar example, a person on welfare may be seen as a victim of large forces who deserves social assistance or a moral weakling who has created her own misfortune and would only be further undermined by help. In our cases, Kennedy could be seen as the playboy son of an ambitious, manipulative father or as the talented scion of a distinguished political clan. Reagan could be considered a dottering poseur sustained by a cunning staff or a leader whose personal warmth and strength made up for any deficiencies in detailed knowledge. In each case the joke leads people to the schema that supports the joker.

Put in slightly different terms, the point is this: Every joke depends on prior knowledge, but prior knowledge always contains multiple perspectives. Are Jews best characterized by their concern for money or their sense of irony or their faith in the power of words? For each of these

schema there exist a plethora of Jewish jokes from the Abe and Sol conversion joke presented by Cohen (27) to the classic "Yitzhak the Lefty."

The particular joke reminds the listener of a particular set of shared beliefs and prejudices and preferences. In our cases, the jokes remind the listeners of their preferences for strong leaders untroubled by the impertinent, pettifogging questions of journalists and the challenges of their inferiors. Instead of the corrupt conniver we see the rising young prince. Instead of the failing flimflam man, we see the relaxed, commanding president.

Cohen seems to approach this point when he says, (40) "When you offer your joke, you solicit their [the audience's] knowledge, you elicit it, **in fact virtually against their will,** [emphasis added] and they find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work." In the phrase emphasized, Cohen makes the crucial point about power relations, even though he does not develop it.

If the audience's perceptions and preferences, and the attendant roles and norms include multiple possibilities and the joke elicits one set of perceptions and preferences, "virtually against their will," then the joke is an extraordinarily powerful shaper of opinion, especially because no persuasion has been used. There is no rational argument, no logic, no evidence. The audience is drawn to concede the point in an instant by laughing, in a situation where the laughter of others creates a powerful peer pressure and where the offer to pleasure is hard to refuse because it comes from a powerful figure. The joke teller has created a sense of community on terms, or invoked the norms that favor him.

The power of this process is the subject of Tony Schwartz's discussion of why certain political advertisements succeed (Schwartz, 1974). Essentially, Schwartz argues that successful

ads do not persuade. Instead, they remind viewers of what they already know or believe. Of course, it is important to underscore the point already made, that people often have multiple beliefs, and that reminding is also getting them to select one belief above another.

Dimensions of Transformation: A Summary

To adumbrate more fully the power of humor to transform a situation, it may be helpful to list the specific changes that take place as opposed pairs. In social terms humor transforms a tense situation to a relaxed one, a serious situation to an enjoyable one, a situation requiring work and analysis and decisions to one allowing for fun (pleasure replaces duty), a situation fraught with potential conflict is changed to a harmonious one, a situation that threatens to expose a disconcerting weakness to one that provides reassurance (threatening versus reaffirming). Finally, a leader subject to scrutiny and control becomes a leader above scrutiny and control.

The Jokes that did not Work: Reagan between Debates in 1984

After his damaging first debate in 1984, Ronald Reagan made two attempts to defuse the situation with humor. As indicated below, he said that he would be happy to arm wrestle his challenger, thus attempting to convert the issue to one of physical strength where his macho image might help him, but also simply attempting to joke the issue away. Mondale's instant retort cited below, that there had been a brain wrestle the previous Sunday, put the focus back on the aspects generally thought to be relevant to the presidency.

Reagan also said that if he'd had as much makeup on as Mondale he would have looked younger too. This remark, not quite a joke or quip, but one that could have inspired ridiculing laughter in a sympathetic audience – "Oh, yeah, Mondale looked like he was done up for the school play" – also fell flat.

There are at least two reasons. First, the context is wrong. A failure in debate is best corrected in the same setting. That is part of the reason why Reagan's jest in the second debate worked so well. He overcame the previous defeat in the same setting, returning to the scene of failure and thus emphasizing the reversal of that failure. Second, these failed jokes are irrelevant to the issue; they are not congruent with the threat. They are not about personal control of language, of oneself, and thus of a social situation. They don't demonstrate command. They don't obviate the age issue; they may even reinforce doubts about the president's powers because the comments appear to be irrelevant or whiny or cranky. The jest in the second debate, by contrast, is right on the issue. It is a classic reversal, which always implies that the jester grasps the issue well enough to stand it on its head and asks the audience, "Are you quick enough to keep up with me?" Further, the tone is correct; the joke was delivered in a confident, relaxed fashion.

The Media Coverage in Detail-the News Magazines and the Washington Post

The review that follows demonstrates the power of Reagan's quip by comparing the patterns of coverage before and after the first and second debates in the three major weekly news magazines, in the Washington Post. The conclusion, bolstered by Mondale's own response and analysis, is that Reagan's use of humor was decisive in settling this issue in his favor.

A detailed review of the coverage shows the following pattern: For U.S. News, the only pre-debate reference to age was a report on the candidates' health that pronounced them both fit and capable. The immediate post-debate coverage contained no reference to the age issue, but the issue of October 22nd, the second to appear after the debate, reflected the growing media consensus that the first debate had made age an issue. An unsigned article titled, "The Age

Issue Raises Its Head," included this line about Reagan, "... aides acknowledge that he has dozed off in cabinet meetings and sometimes gives rambling answers to reporters' questions." (U. S. News & World Report, 1984a). In the same issue, the "Washington Whispers" column said, "Strict orders by Mondale's staff on the newly revived issue of Reagan's age: Hands off. The question of whether the President is too old at 73 to serve another term is being raised sufficiently by the news media." (U.S. News & World Report, 1984b) A third story referred to White House concerns: "White House officials were uncomfortably aware that Reagan came across to many watching the debate as unsure, inarticulate and – worst of all – perhaps too old at 73 to begin a second four-year term." The story goes on to quote one viewer who found the president "incoherent and disorganized." (U. S. News & World Report, 1984c)

By contrast, in the post-debate issues of October 28th and November 5th, the age issue had been reduced to something that wasn't going to matter much. Noting Reagan's lead, the main article said that his organizers, "... predict it will hold up despite speculation over the debates and the issue of the President's age..." (U. S. News & World Report, 1984d) A story reporting the discussions of a voter panel said, "Reagan's age of 73 is considered a drawback, although only Mondale diehards are greatly worried about it." (U.S. News & World Report, 1984e) A cartoon shows Mondale futilely trying to shovel a load of rocks representing issues uphill against a Reagan landslide poised at the top; one of the rocks is labeled, "Old Age Issue." (U.S. News & World Report, 1984f) In the post-election issue another cartoon shows a smiling, youthful, unwrinkled pugilist Reagan victorious over

Mondale and poised for Yeltsin and other contenders. (U.S. News & World Report, 1984g)

The lead story notes, "Foes cannot count on using the President's age against him. The personal appeal of Reagan, who will be 74 on February 6, outweighs any

concern about his relaxed work schedule or his public flubs about government detail." (U.S. News & World Report, 1984h)

Time's coverage in the October 1st and 8th issues noted first that the Mondale team was hoping for blunders (Magnuson, 1984a,18) and then that the president had made one in regard to the bombing of the American embassy in Beirut, ironically, a failed attempt at humor. Referring to uncompleted security arrangements that had left the embassy vulnerable, "With a smile, the President then suggested a singularly inappropriate analogy: 'Anyone that's ever had their kitchen done over knows that it never gets done as soon as you wish.'" (Magnuson, 1984 a, 18.) A poll asking "Who better demonstrates each characteristic?" and including the item, "Young and healthy enough for the job," found 27 per cent saying that Reagan was and 51 per cent saying that Mondale was. (Magnuson, 1984 a, 24) At the same time an entire story was devoted to Reagan's appeal among young, first-time voters. (Doerner, 1984, 25)

Post debate coverage in the October 22 issue included prominent reference to the age issue and another failed Presidential attempt at humor: "The President seemed especially nettled by widespread speculation that his hesitation and fumbling in the debate meant he was feeling and showing, all of his 73 years. On the White House lawn, Reagan remarked to reporters that "If I had as much makeup on as he [Mondale] did, I'd have looked younger too"-a surprisingly catty comment from a President who before had always joked about his age." (Church, 1984, 25)

The story goes on to say that the debate changed the "tone and atmosphere of the

campaign," and that:

"By the next morning [after the debate], in fact, the President's performance had broken the long-standing though unofficial taboo against press and TV discussion of his age. Columns and airwaves filled with speculation about whether age had anything to do with Reagan's poor performance. Mondale vowed to stay out of the argument, but other Democrats were less cautious. Demanded New York Mayor Ed Koch: 'Do you want his shaky finger near the button?'" (Church, 1984, 27)

Reflecting the issue's new prominence Time followed this lead story with one headlined, "Questions of Age and Competence." (Thomas, 1984a) Again Reagan is quoted as attempting to counter the issue with a one liner: "Reagan at first tried to deflate the issue with quips. 'I'll challenge him to arm wrestle any time.' Retorted Mondale, 'We had a little brain wrestle on Sunday night.'" (Thomas, 1984a, 33) Time's October 29th coverage began with a story headlined "A Tie Goes to the Gipper," (Magnuson, 1984b) which included the following summary:

Ronald Reagan had to show millions of Americans watching Sunday night's face-off in Kansas City that he was in command of his office, in control of his facts and not addled by age. Once again, the Gipper was up to the task.

On a stage with softer backlighting than in Louisville, Reagan looked vigorous and spoke like the Great Communicator of political legend. The nervousness of two weeks before was gone, as were the long pauses and defensive stance. He was occasionally loose and rambling on substance, but constantly cool and winning in manner. Above all, he strongly diffused the age issue that had arisen after the first debate and may have been the only obstacle to his re-election.

Indeed, Reagan turned the issue around with his oh-so-familiar grin and a sharp, well-rehearsed quip: "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." Mondale smiled back but had to have been surprised by the unexpected twist, and the audience laughed with the President.

By November 5, the focus had shifted to whether or not Mondale could avoid a landslide. Summarizing the campaign and noting Mondale's inability to gain on the issues of the deficit or leadership, Time commented, "Only Reagan, it seemed, could really hurt himself. When he appeared tentative and somewhat confused in the first debate, his age suddenly became an issue

in the campaign. When he seemed in command in the second debate, the issue just as quickly receded." (Thomas, 1984b, 20) An analytical piece found that, "Even the issue of age, which surfaced after Reagan's rambling performance in Louisville, failed to mar the President's all-star rating. A disquieting 39% [of poll respondents] thought the President was slowing down in his command of the facts, but a resounding 79% said his age would not affect their vote, and 72% did not think Reagan was too old to serve four more years." (Tifft, 1984, 21)

Post election, Time commented almost ironically on the age issue as part of an article denigrating the quality of the campaign overall. (Morrow, 1984, 31)

Reagan's 73 years was a factor against him. The nastier comics referred to it as the "drool factor." His mind wandered, some said, and he got the facts wrong. In splendidly backhanded defense, Reagan supporters said it was not age: Reagan has always been sloppy with the facts ... The implicit line of some of the Reagan defenders was the reverse: that the President had a mind unencumbered by facts—the sort of details, they mean, that used to bog Jimmy Carter down. Reagan can stand on the bridge of the ship of state, point the general direction, and let the subalterns worry about the navigation. In the second debate, Reagan scored with calculatedly offhanded brilliance when he said he was "not going to exploit for political purposes, my opponents youth and inexperience."

The lead story in the November 19th issue took a similar line:

The Democrats revived only once, immediately after the first Reagan-Mondale debate on Oct. 7. Reagan's rambling and unfocused performance briefly raised the one issue his aides had not prepared to counter: his age and competence. But it lasted only until the second debate, on Oct. 21. The President once more looked confident and vigorous, the slight Mondale rise in the polls promptly reversed itself. (Church, 1984b, 41)

Newsweek's pre-debate coverage contained only oblique references to the age issue in the form of a description of Reagan's faltering performance when he took impromptu questions

from a college audience, and the headline "Reagan as Grandfather" to a story that described his family relations. (Shapiro, 1984a, 22; *Newsweek*, 1984a) The first post-debate coverage reflected the initial media consensus of a draw, but also contained several references to the age issue from commentators such as NBC's John Chancellor, Jesse Jackson, and Olympia Snow. (Shapiro, 1984,b, 32; *Newsweek*, 1984b, 35) By October 22 *Newsweek* had joined the new interpretation with a story entitled, "Reagan and the Age Issue: The president's wobbly debate performance helps Mondale make points." (Morgenthau, 1984, 26) The story argued,

Suddenly, the "age issue" had become the No. 1 topic of Campaign '84. First, an estimated 80 million viewers had witnessed the Great Communicator's stumbling and hesitation on the air-a performance that took both the president's men and even Fritz Mondale by surprise. And it was not some mean-spirited zinger by his opponent that made the connection with Reagan's age; it was a bastion of editorial conservatism, The Wall Street Journal. In a front-page head-line last week, the Journal bluntly asked, "IS [the] OLDEST U.S. PRESIDENT NOW SHOWING HIS AGE? REAGAN DEBATE PERFORMANCE INVITES OPEN SPECULATION ON HIS ABILITY TO SERVE. Journal reporter James M. Perry said the story had been in the works for weeks and that its devastating timing was coincidence.

This could hardly have consoled Reagan's agonized aides, as other newspapers and broadcasters picked up the theme. Within days White House polls detected a 3-point drop in Reagan's 16-to-18-point lead nationwide. Mondale aides said surveys done for the Mondale campaign by polltaker Pat Caddell showed a 6-point shift. Hoping to limit the damage, the White House hastily released a statement on Reagan's last medical exam with a doctor's conclusion that Reagan was "mentally alert"... But that move further focussed attention on the first real chink in what had seemed an impregnable campaign. All at once, Walter Mondale's long, uphill struggle had a jolt of new energy-and the second presidential debate on Oct. 21 took on new significance. A second faltering performance, virtually all the experts agreed would do much worse damage to the president's cause.

A follow story entitled, "The Doctors Examine Age" (Clark, 1984) quoted favorable reports from Reagan's doctors, but also noted incidents in which the President had to be

prompted during a session with the press. The accompanying photograph, depicting a determined and youthful looking Reagan clad in a presidential windbreaker and tie hoisting a barbell, seemed to favor the President. A Herblock cartoon made fun of the president's attempted humorous riposte, depicting Reagan and his vice president in adjoining arm chairs with a wrinkled, testy looking Reagan saying, "Well, George, it certainly looked to me as if she was wearing makeup." (Herblock, 1984)

Newsweek's October 29th post-second-debate coverage began with a headline nearly identical to Time's, "Reagan Wins a Draw." (Shapiro, 1984c) After noting Reagan's staunch defense of his own leadership, the story commented, "Reagan never visibly faltered nor lent obvious support to Mondale's overriding thesis of an out-of-touch president. In fact, the president deftly defused the age issue with a well-timed vintage Reagan quip: 'I will not make age an issue of this campaign-I'm not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience.'" (Shapiro, 1984c, 26)

After quoting the expected Republican interpretation from Stuart Spencer that "The age issue is gone," the story quoted the more telling remark of a leading Democratic media consultant, "The election was over when Reagan made the age joke. All Reagan had to do was seal off the age issue and the joke did that." (Shapiro, 1984c, 27) Later in the story, poll data confirmed this conclusion. "Reagan came out with a 52-25 percent margin as more thoughtful and well informed, and a 48-27 percent edge as more confident and self-assured. The age issue apparently was not helping Mondale: after the debate, 34 percent of his target voters said they were very concerned or fairly concerned about Reagan's ability to meet the demands of a second term-down from 40 percent who felt that way just before the TV face-off in Kansas City."

(Shapiro, 1984c,28)

By November 5, Newsweek had adopted the same frame as the other two-could Reagan make it a landslide. In an interview with Reagan, the questioner only asked, "Were you concerned that age might become a dominant issue?" and accepted the answer, "Not really. They've tried for so long ... to make it an issue and-besides, I don't feel that old," without reference to any of the campaign's incidents or issues. (DeFrank and Clift, 1984: 2.8) A cartoon shows Mondale addressing a packed field house and muttering "So much for my prepared remarks on the age factor," in the face of a sea of signs saying, "College Students for Reagan," "Baby Boomers for Reagan," "Cabbage Patch Kids for Reagan," "Punkers for Reagan," etc. The media made much of the fact that Reagan had an edge among young people. (Benson, 1984)

Post election coverage noted the age factor as a concern before the decision to run again and mentioned it again as a factor that Reagan had overcome. "Reagan seemed all smiles and Mondale all stumbles until the first debate, when the age issue popped out of the bottle. But the next debate tucked it safely in again-and the victory train rolled on." (Goodman, 1984, 86) As part of a long "inside story" Newsweek included a six-page section entitled, "The Rise and Fall of the age issue" in which the following comment on Reagan's one-liner occurs:

Reagan's own performance was a great deal less than masterly. His second summation in particular was nearly as weak as his first, a mangled version of an old routine of his about writing a letter for a time capsule; his people gave it to him precisely because he knew it so well, but he still got lost trying to retell it. But he did not otherwise stumble or draw blanks as he had the first time, and when he finally was asked about his age... [he said] Of course he felt up to the job..."And I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." Even Mondale had to laugh; the networks had their sound bite, and in Wirthlin's electronic focus group, the positive response went off the chart. (Goodman, 1984, 109)

The latter line refers to a focus group set up by the Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin in which forty voters from Kansas City were connected to a TRACE computer by handsets that included buttons that allowed them to register positive and negative responses.

Newsweeklies-summary

From the newsweeklies the following narrative emerges: in the first debate Reagan's missteps combined with Mondale's relaxed, confident performance to raise the age issue as it had never been raised before in the campaign. The second debate laid the issue to rest, and the weeklies only mentioned it thereafter as an issue that had been overcome, a point they emphasized by noting Reagan's appeal to the young.

Coverage in the Washington Post

With small variations, the Post's coverage followed patterns similar to that of the weekly newsmagazines. In the aftermath of the bombing of the Beirut embassy, Lou Cannon referred to "Reaganisms" (mangled phrases or words) and Mary McGrory accused the president of bungling and incompetence, but neither raised the issue of age directly. (Cannon, 1984a) and (McGrory, 1984a) One direct reference occurred in an article discussing pre-debate arrangements: Reagan's podium would be equipped with a special device to amplify questions to compensate for his deafness. (Hoffman and Cannon, 1984)

The immediate post-debate coverage on October 8th was mixed, with David Broder asserting that "Reagan remained in command of himself and the situation throughout the evening" (Broder, 1984a) while Tom Shales criticized the president much more severely (Shales,

1984). By the next day, the Post's coverage had joined the consensus: the president had performed so badly that his age was now an issue. In addition to a column by McGrory (1984b) the coverage included interviews with a group of voters in Hanover Park, Illinois who voiced concerns for the first time about Reagan's age. One man said that he had been committed to Reagan, but after seeing him was now only leaning toward him owing to new concerns about his age. (Schram, 1984) Lou Cannon's page one story on October 10 was headlined, "Age Emerges As New Issue in Campaign." (Cannon, 1984b)

Following the second debate, most of the coverage on October 22nd conceded that the age issue had been settled and emphasized the importance of Reagan's joke. Here is an excerpt from David Broder's page-one "news analysis:

The turnaround for Reagan in the debate-and perhaps in the campaign-came 30 minutes into tonight's televised encounter in the Municipal Auditorium, when Henry Trehwitt of the Baltimore Sun asked the president bluntly if, at his age, he might lack the strength and stamina to see the nation through a lengthy international crisis.

Reagan did not flinch. Instead, he did what he has done so often at crucial moments of his political career. He delivered the perfect rejoinder. Dismissing the notion that he could not stay in the White House situation room as long as he was needed, Reagan smiled and said, "I will not make age an issue. I will not exploit my opponent's youth and inexperience."

There was a huge laugh, in which Mondale joined. But it may well have been that the biggest barrier to Reagan's reelection was swept away in that moment. (Broder, 1984b)

The lead news story, under a banner headline, also made this remark a prominent part of the coverage, calling it, "The one surprise of the debate, which appeared to catch Mondale off guard... " and noting that Mondale joined in the laughter. (Cannon and Taylor, 1984)

Over the next few days, a Post editorial and columnists Lou Cannon and Haynes Johnson,

(Johnson, 1984) argued that the age issue was not settled or should not be, Cannon saying that Reagan was "slowing down and has nothing new to say," (Cannon, 1984c) the editorial contended that the age issue had always been a misnomer used to cover Reagan's "fumbling and factual chaos," including his saying that submarine launched nuclear missiles could be recalled. (*Washington Post*, 1984) However, the editorial also conceded that the age issue "is said now to have vanished." There were also a number of stories on various Reagan gaffes and concerns about his statements concerning Armageddon, (Hyer, 1984; Rosenfeld, 1984) all issues that by the Post editorial's logic should have been the focus of discussion, but the age issue itself seems generally to have been laid to rest. So, the picture here is more mixed than it was in the weekly magazines. Some journalists writing in the Post continued to raise the issue even while conceding that it no longer mattered to the public.

Effects

To summarize, the pattern in the newsweeklies supports the hypothesis that the age issue was put to rest after the second debate both in terms of what journalists wrote and in terms of what the public thought. The coverage in the Post supports the second part of the hypothesis, but is mixed in terms of the journalists. Some of them, including the Post's editorial board, felt that laying to rest the age issue was misleading and premature.

With regard to the impact of Reagan's joke in the second debate, the coverage supports the idea that the joke was crucial. A number of observers and experts including David Broder, longtime political correspondent for the Washington Post, an unnamed Democratic consultant, and the focus group assembled by Richard Wirthlin found its impact to be crucial.

Finally, Mondale himself testified to the joke's decisive effect. As part of a 1995 PBS

documentary with Jim Lehrer, (Debating Our Destiny) Mondale was asked about the president's joke:

Lehrer [referring to the joke and the laughter that followed]: "Is that when you knew you were in trouble?"

Mondale: "Yah. He got the audience with that one. I could tell. That one hurt. I knew he'd gotten me there.
"That was really the end of my campaign that night."
[emphasis added]

Lehrer: "Did you know it that night, that it was over?"

Mondale: "Yah, I walked off and I was almost certain that it was over, and it was."

This comment and the patterns of coverage described leave little doubt of humor's decisive effects on the public and journalists. In its speed and impact humor ranks among the most powerful forms of symbolic reassurance.

Conclusion

Applying the framework of symbolic reassurance to explain the dynamics of jokes and humorous remarks reveals how leaders are able by taking control of the immediate situation, by going on the offensive, by reasserting their leadership status and re-establishing deference, by relieving tension, by channeling aggressive impulses, and by offering escape from difficult choices to use humor to "defuse" potentially threatening situations and re-establish their power. The key to the success of humor is the creation of a perception that creates a community of appreciation advantageous to the leaders.

Humor works when it is congruent with the threatening issue, when it taps traditional

feelings and role conceptions and when the leader using it has established a relation of respect and liking as Reagan had and Kennedy was in the process of doing. On the other hand, humor does not work when it is incongruent, as Reagan's between-debates attempts were incongruent, or when it violates social norms as Reagan did in another context and as George W. Bush has done more recently.

In September 1984, a suicide bomber successfully attacked the United States embassy in Lebanon, the third such attack in that country in a period of seventeen months. Reagan tried to use his famously folksy manner and humor to mitigate the blame placed on his administration. The New York Times reported (Rosenbaum, 1984) that, "When Mr. Reagan was asked in New York on Sunday about delays in installing security devices at the embassy in a suburb of East Beirut, he said, "Anyone that's ever had their kitchen done over knows that it never gets done as soon as you wish it would." The joke provoked outrage; the Democrats quickly attacked: Walter Mondale, their presidential candidate, Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, the Speaker of the House, and Harry Byrd, the senior Democratic Senator, all proclaimed the president's remarks inappropriate. Nearly all the media commentary agreed with Times columnist Russell Baker's "cute, silly, and irrelevant" a typical commentary." (Baker, 1984) No one tried in any serious way to defend Reagan's remark.

About twenty years later, in March 2004, a year after the beginning of the Iraq War, which had been predicated on the existence of weapons of mass destruction, which were not found in Iraq, President George W. Bush prepared an attempt at humor for annual dinner of Washington radio and television correspondents. At this event "where presidents typically poke fun at the press and themselves (Rose and Bazinet, 2004)" a slide show depicted the president in

the White House, looking under chairs and behind furniture. Bush narrated, saying, "Those weapons of mass destruction have to be here somewhere... Nope, no weapons over there. Maybe under here."

The Democratic presidential campaign spoke through an Iraq War veteran, who said, "No weapons of mass destruction have been found and that is no joke-this is for real (Rose and Bazinet, 2004)." Relatives of slain servicemen also condemned the remarks, as a travesty and disrespectful, but one defended the president's remarks, saying, "Maybe that's his way of releasing some of the tension." Yet this defense does not say the remarks were funny and is at best an attempt to deflect blame, not to join in the laughter.

Put in terms of the dynamics of creating or failing to create a community of appreciation, the analysis would be as follows: Who would join a community (of appreciation) based on making light of the deaths of Americans, especially American soldiers, marines, or embassy personnel? What public figure, whether politician or journalist, would thus insult the grieving families or the public united in a community of respect, sympathy, and patriotism? What ordinary citizen would respond with laughter, tacitly saying these deaths may be objects of sport or mockery? Even the supportive statement for Bush from the parent of a dead soldier excuses his behavior, but does not embrace it.

Further, both attempts at humor suggest that the president in question did not take his responsibilities serious. Reagan compares preparing crucial security measures to having a kitchen redone. Bush makes light of the main reason he himself offered for starting a war putting Americans in harm's way.

These examples reinforce the main analytical point by demonstrating the limits on the

ability of leaders to use humor to their own benefit. Because humor depends upon creating a community of appreciation based on shared knowledge, values, and perceptions, it will not work if the leader's joke appeals to deviant perceptions and violates majority values or undermines the conception of leadership. Most Americans honor fallen servicepeople. Most believe that leaders should take their jobs seriously. A joke that makes light of their sacrifice or that tries to excuse a failure of leadership by trivializing this most serious of situations is bound to fail.

On the other hand, humor that works elicits a response that confirms a community of appreciation based on deference to the leader, instead of the community of appreciation and shared perception that would threaten the leader. It is the ability to produce this shift without changing policy or committing tangible resources that makes humor one of the most efficient forms of symbolic reassurance.

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1. Much of the argument that follows rests on the currently unpopular direct effects model. A full discussion of the model's pros and cons would eliminate the article itself, but a good review and support for the idea that direct effects do occur can be found in Barker and Lawrence (2006).

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