

OPINION: WHY IS THIS (EXPLETIVE DELETED) FUNNY?

CARL GOLDEN | MAY 3, 2018

Michelle Wolf's f-bomb-studded comic routine at the White House Correspondents Association dinner shows just how much profanity has replaced political satire



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In the 11 years I served as press secretary to Govs. Tom Kean (eight years) and Christie Whitman (three years), it fell to me once a year to draft their speeches for the annual New Jersey Legislative Correspondents' Club dinner.

I was selected for the task presumably because my daily interactions with the State House press corps blessed me with insight into the personality quirks of the media, legislators, and political figures that I could then exploit into witty one-liners guaranteed to bring the house down.

I approached it determined to be funny but not cruel, to elicit laughter but not embarrassment, to skewer but not eviscerate, to launch barbed zingers that pinch but leave no scars.

Sometimes it was easy; most times not.

My first effort occurred in 1982, Kean's first year in office, and I turned out what I thought was a brilliant blend of satire and parody guaranteed to leave the audience rolling in the aisles and bring them to their feet in a spontaneous outburst of admiration and appreciation for the display of clever wit.

I recall sitting across from Kean while he silently read my work, convinced he'd recognize the finely honed sense of humor it conveyed.

He finished, dropped the pages on his desk, looked at me and said: "Why is this funny?"

Cheap laughs

It should be noted here that Kean was a shaggy-dog story kind of guy incapable of delivering a punch line that poked fun at others or used their foibles or perceived shortcomings in search of cheap laughs.

I managed to salvage most of that 1982 speech, rewriting it to remove some of the sting while preserving most of its insight. If it elicited chuckles rather than belly laughs, well, I may have been a little disappointed, but Kean was comfortable.

His comment – "Why is this funny?" – bubbled to the surface of my memory when I watched the performance of Michelle Wolf, the comedian hired to entertain the audience at the White House Correspondents Association dinner last week.

While her routine included a few guffaws, most of it was wince-inducing and cringe worthy. Flinging the f-bomb around the room as if it were no more embarrassing than uttering "aw, heck," and utilizing various scatological references to make a point was a poor answer to "Why is this funny?"

I readily concede that the style of humor has changed dramatically since 1982 and that the traditional boundaries on using profanity vanished long ago.

Four-letter words

There were no prudes in the media or in political life in 1982; it was simply that we all exercised self-restraint (admirable or not) to avoid using the kind of language Wolf so casually employed in mixed company. We just weren't into self-embarrassment by drawing gasps from the audience at the shock value of four-letter words.

There were other limits recognized back then as well. Ridiculing the physical appearance of someone was forbidden, as was any reference to race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. Explicit comments or innuendos concerning sex were the greatest taboo of all.

It wasn't as if these qualities weren't discussed occasionally in private among a few, but building a speech around them and delivering it from a podium in front of a few thousand dinner-goers begged Tom Kean's question – "Why is this funny?"

Wolf certainly has her defenders, those who argue that speech, no matter how offensive, cannot and should not be suppressed. For standup comics, edgy is what they do. Others faulted the Correspondents Association itself for failing to research Wolf's career and past performances more diligently to get a better sense of her routines.

The depth of dismay, though, was evident in the post-dinner on-the-record comments of several reporters who felt Wolf's numerous personal broadsides were needless and excessively insulting.

When reporters accustomed to street corner language and wisecracks about personal traits or intellectual deficiencies of others express over-the-top criticisms, though, it's time to re-think the premise of the entire social gathering.

It's not likely the dinner tradition will end as a result of the uproar over Wolf's speech. Changes, perhaps, or more careful vetting of the person hired to entertain the crowd might be considered.

One place to start might be running the draft speech by Tom Kean, so he can look across his desk and ask, "Why is this funny?"

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