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Transcript 



MOYERS: When future historians come to write the political story of our times, they will first have to review hundreds of hours of a cable television program called THE DAILY SHOW. You simply can't understand American politics in the new millennium without THE DAILY SHOW.

For example, if you're my age, you no doubt remember the Lincoln-Douglas Debates as the epitome of political discourse. If you're a little younger, you were taught to study the Kennedy-Nixon debates for their revelation of strong opinions, strongly expressed.

But, Lincoln-Douglas, Kennedy-Nixon are nothing compared to a debate conducted recently on THE DAILY SHOW. Moderated not by Public Television's Jim Lehrer, but by a man many consider to be the preeminent political analyst of our time, the distinguished commentator and anchorman, Jon Stewart. Take a look.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Stewart: We're gonna have an honest, open debate between the President of the United States and the one man we believe has the insight and the cahones to stand up to him.

Thank you, Governor. Mr. President, you won the coin toss. The first question will go to you.

Why is the United States of America using its power to change governments in foreign countries?

Bush: We must stand up for our security and for the permanent rights and the hopes of mankind.

Stewart: Well, certainly that represents a bold new doctrine in foreign policy, Mr. President. Governor Bush, do you agree with that?

Bush: Yeah, I'm not so sure that the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, "This is the way it's gotta be."

Stewart: Well, that's interesting. Well, that's a difference of opinion, and certainly that's what this country is about. Differences of opinion. Mr. President, let me just get specific. Why are in Iraq?

Bush: We will be umm, changing the regime of Iraq for the good of the Iraqi people.

Stewart: Governor, then I'd like to hear your response on that.

Bush: If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us. I think one way for us to end up being viewed as the ugly American is to go around the world saying we do it this way, so should you.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

MOYERS: The masterful moderator of that demonstration of man's ability to hold two contradictory opinions is with me now. Jon Stewart has anchored Comedy Central's THE DAILY SHOW for four-and-a-half-years. A compendium of news, interviews and features, held up to a fractured mirror to reveal a greater truth. THE DAILY SHOW is many things, but most important, and simply, it is very smart and very funny. Welcome to NOW.

STEWART: Thank you very much. It's nice to be here.

MOYERS: I do not know... I have a confession.

STEWART: Alright.

MOYERS: I do not know whether you are practicing a old form of parody and satire.

STEWART: Uh-huh.

MOYERS: Or a new form of journalism.

STEWART: Well then that either speaks to the sad state of comedy or the sad state of news. I can't figure out which one. I think, honestly, we're practicing a new form of desperation. Where we just are so inundated with mixed messages from the media and from politicians that we're just trying to sort it out for ourselves.

MOYERS: What do...

STEWART: The show's a selfish pursuit.

MOYERS: What do you see that we journalists don't see?

STEWART: I don't think... I think we see exactly what you do see. And... but for some reason, don't analyze it in that manner or put it on the air in that manner. I can't tell you how many times we'll run into a journalist and go, "Boy that's...I wish we could be saying that. That's exactly the way we see it and that's exactly the way we'd like to be saying that." And I always think, "Well, why don't you?"

MOYERS: But when I report the news on this broadcast, people say I'm making it up. When you make it up, they say you're telling the truth.

STEWART: Yes. Exactly. It's funny. I was talking to Jayson Blair about this.

MOYERS: He's our next guest.

STEWART: Is he really?

MOYERS: Yeah. We use him as a kind of analyst of...

STEWART: Does he come in different disguises?

MOYERS: Right.

STEWART: For me it was just exciting to see fake news catching on like that. We don't... you know, it's interesting. I think we don't make things up. We just distill it to, hopefully, its most humorous nugget. And in that sense it seems faked and skewed just because we don't have to be subjective or pretend to be objective. We can just put it out there.

MOYERS: You certainly see journalists in a way we don't see ourselves. One of my favorite sketches of all time is about your far-flung correspondent whom you have now flung into Baghdad. Take a look at this.

STEWART: Yes.

[VIDEO CLIP:]

Stewart: Word here is that the attack will actually come in the form of a full blown assault on the city of Baghdad itself, a massive overwhelming strike that will instantly cripple the Iraqi infrastructure.

Carell: Really? I did not know that.

Stewart: Many of your colleagues have already fled the city and the country in anticipation of an immediate attack. Some believe it could be a matter of hours.

Carell: It would've been nice for one of my colleagues to fill me in about that. Left a message on my voicemail perhaps.

Stewart: Steve, please, while you're still there, tell us. Bush is still offering the option of exile for Saddam. Now, is that a possibility, or is Saddam going to hold firm on this?

Carell: Well, John, the possibility of Saddam accepting exile seems unlikely given his defiance

and continued hopes that the Arab world will united behind him.

Stewart: Steve, what about the long-term damage to some of our key European relationships?

Carell: Will you hold on one second? Are you kidding me? I asked for Peppercorn Ranch, this is vinaigrette. And if this a sourdough roll, than I'm Walter Cronkite. Thank you.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

MOYERS: Where do you get these guys?

STEWART: These guys are very talented improv comedians and actors and writers. And we get lucky enough to cast a net and catch some of them to come over and work for us. And they're a tremendous troop of guys.

MOYERS: Which is funnier? CROSSFIRE or HARDBALL?

STEWART: CROSSFIRE or HARDBALL? Which is funnier? Which is more soul-crushing, do you mean? Both are equally dispiriting in their... you know, the whole idea that political discourse has degenerated into shows that have to be entitled CROSSFIRE and HARDBALL. And you know, "I'm Gonna Beat Your Ass" or whatever they're calling them these days is mind-boggling.

CROSSFIRE, especially, is completely an apropos name. It's what innocent bystanders are caught in when gangs are fighting. And it just boggles my mind that that's given a half hour, an hour a day to... I don't understand how issues can be dissected from the left and from the right as though... even cartoon characters have more than left and right. They have up and down.

I mean, how... it's so two-dimensional to think that any analysis can come from, "It's the left and it's the right and well, we've had that discussion and that's done."

MOYERS: You don't think of yourself as a social critic, do you?

STEWART: Social critic? No.

MOYERS: Media critic?

STEWART: No.

MOYERS: You don't?

STEWART: I think of myself as a comedian who has the pleasure of writing jokes about things that I actually care about. And that's really it. You know, if I really wanted to enact social change... I have great respect for people who are in the front lines and the trenches of trying to enact social change. I am far lazier than that.

I am a tiny, neurotic man, standing in the back of the room throwing tomatoes at the chalk board. And that's really it. And what we do is we come in in the morning and we go, "Did you see that thing last night? Aahh!" And then we spend the next 8 or 9 hours trying to take this and make it into something funny.

MOYERS: You mean something like this. Friday, front page headline: "War's Costs Bring Democratic Anger." I mean, these are the guys who voted for the war.

STEWART: You don't want to get the Democrats angry, because then they'll maybe meet in private. And you don't want that. If that's what it takes to get the Democrats angry, I feel badly for the Democrats right now. This is, Bush has raised \$200 million. I mean, he's gonna raise \$200 million. And he's gonna need all of that money to defeat this Democratic field. This is a rough...

I mean, think about it, you've got Senator Kerry who's like Gore but without you know all the charisma. And then you've got Lieberman, who is for the war. And thinks the tax cuts could really help. He's basically for people who want to vote for Bush but don't think Bush is Jewish enough.

Then you have Dean who's raised a tremendous amount of money. It's gonna be tough for Bush to defeat any of these guys.

MOYERS: Let's take a look at a recent clip about Dean on your show.

STEWART: Alright.

[VIDEO CLIP:]

Stewart: Speaking of the Democratic contenders — and someone's got to — Vermont Governor Howard Dean recently became the first to release a campaign ad.

Dean: I'm Howard Dean. It's time for the truth because the truth is that George Bush's

foreign policy isn't making us safer.

Stewart: Wow, if you listen closely you can almost hear Al Gore saying, "Dude, Loosen up."

Dean: I believe it's time to put Americans back to work, to provide health insurance for every American. It's time for Democrats to be Democrats again. That's why I'm running for President. And that's why I approved this message.

Stewart: That's why I approved this message?! Alright! A can-do guy who's in charge of the things that comes out of his own mouth!

[END VIDEO CLIP]

STEWART: I'm looking forward to Dean as President. We haven't had a President whose neck is larger than his head in a long time. And it's time that changed.

MOYERS: Is that a healthy criterion for voting?

STEWART: It's a very healthy criterion for voting. To be fair, him saying, that's why I approved that message, is based on the new campaign laws. So.

MOYERS: You have to say at the end, "I paid for this message."

STEWART: "I paid for this message." Exactly. I don't know that you actually have to say, "I approved this message." I think if you're in the message, it sort of stands to reason that you might have approved it.

MOYERS: Which have been the best years for you? The Clinton years or the Bush years?

STEWART: Both were vexing but in somewhat different ways. I feel like the Clinton years were — and by the way, when you say great years, I feel awful about that because it does...

MOYERS: Best years. Funniest years.

STEWART: Funniest years is different. Because you do feel a little bit like, I don't know if you play craps. Have you ever been to Vegas with, let's say, Bennett? But, if you roll craps there's... you can bet with the line or against the line. If you bet with the line you're sort of betting with the table for everybody to do well. Or you can bet against the line. If a guy craps out, then you do well.

That's what it's like to be a comedian. You basically stand and stare at the world and hope it craps out cause that's a good year for you. So that's not a pleasant feeling. But the Clinton years were vexing in this idea that, here's someone who stands for values and interests that I think... that I would hold dear. And yet, throws it all away on appetites he can't control. And that's upsetting.

These years are upsetting because I feel like we're being gas lit as a country in that what we see going on is just being described as the opposite but relentlessly by, you know, the administration. So it's a different problem.

MOYERS: And what is the media doing to help us sort us out?

STEWART: Oh, they're not. Yeah, no. That's, yeah, they sat this one out. Yeah, they're not getting involved. It's very tiring. And they have weather reports to give. Nah, the media is not interested in fairness. The media is... Look, politicians have figured out the media. Let's face facts. When television first appeared it proved itself to be a vital insight into the process.

Nixon — you mentioned the Nixon-Kennedy debates. It was... at that point, politicians didn't know how to handle the media. So Nixon could say, "I look fine. I don't need make-up. These lights won't make me sweat. I'm sure I'll come off as calm and collected and eloquent."

And then, as he was sweating and looked, you know, maniacal, he ended up losing. Well, at this point... so at that point television was ahead of the game. Politicians have caught up. They understand that 24-hour news networks? They don't have time for journalism. They only have time for reporting. They only have time to be handed things and go, this is what I've just been handed by the administration. And they read it.

So now that the administration knows that, and they're very disciplined, they can manipulate what goes on the air and what sets the agenda. And that's what they do.

MOYERS: You were the first to call attention, if I remember correctly, to the fact that the war in Iraq was over as far as the media were concerned. Let's take a look at this clip.

[VIDEO CLIP:]

Stewart: What could it be? All that fanfare. I know the president is in the Middle East trying to jumpstart the peace process. Or they finally found those weapons of mass destruction we've heard so much about.

Commentator: Martha Stewart has been indicted.

Commentator: Nine count indictment.

Commentator: Martha Stewart has taken the walk into the Federal Courthouse.

Commentator: But it certainly is a tragedy.

Commentator: 10 years jail time.

Commentator: Bear with me here, because it's a pretty lengthy indictment.

Commentator: Martha Stewart knew what she was doing was wrong.

Commentator: After terrorism this is the number two priority for the Justice Department.

Stewart: Yes! Finally captured Martha Stewart. You know, with all the massive and almost completely unpunished fraud perpetrated on the American public by such companies as Enron, Global Crossing, Tyco and Adelphia, we finally got the ringleader. Maybe now we can lower the nation's terror alert to periwinkle.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

MOYERS: The war is over.

STEWART: It's over, baby. We're back to the business of scandal mongering.

MOYERS: THE WASHINGTON POST said, since the first of the year, the Laci Petersen case has been featured 79 times on Greta van Susteren's evening program on FOX news; 40 times on MSNBC's THE ABRAMS REPORT; 34 times on CNN's LARRY KING LIVE; and 20 times on HARDBALL.

STEWART: And I hope they get to the bottom of it. I hope they find out.

MOYERS: Is this why you're able to say, without any challenge, that we're being gas lighted? That we keep hearing one thing while something else is being done?

STEWART: No, there's no question. There is...in your mind...look, you know they always talk about the news wants to be objective. Leaving FOX NEWS out of it because that's sort of a different animal. And, by the way, a very entertaining animal. I enjoy watching FOX NEWS and I think every country should have their own Al-Jazeera.

MOYERS: They soon will.

STEWART: They soon will. But the other news networks, you know, they have this idea that they're being objective. But news has never been objective. It's always... what does every newscast start with? "Our top stories tonight." That's a list. That's an object... that's a subjective... some editor made a decision: "Here's our top stories. #1: There's a fire in the Bronx. #2: They arrested Martha Stewart."

Whatever... however you place those stories, is a subjective ranking as much as AFI's "100 Best Films in the World" is. So why not take advantage of that and actually analyze what you do think is important and make that... I will guarantee you, in the newsrooms across the country, they don't believe the Laci Petersen story is the most important story that they have to deal with. I guarantee it!

MOYERS: Why is it that President Bush has to go to South Africa to be asked a critical question about nuclear weapons of mass destruction?

STEWART: Because in the United States, he doesn't see anybody in the press. He's in a small room, with a treadmill, that he runs on. And a little brush to clear diorama. Like he is not exposed in any way.

You know what's great? Watch a Bush press conference, and then turn on Tony Blair and Parliament. Where he literally has to sit in front of his most vociferous critic. And that critic will say, "Sir, on the 13th, the dossier of the French...would not...the nuclear... You were hiding things. How do you answer, sir?"

"The distinguished gentleman is wrong. I can prove it in this way."

Contrast that with the press conference that Bush had on the eve of war. "Uh, okay, the next question is Jim. Is there a Jim here? Yeah. You got the next one."

"That is not the agreed upon question. We're gonna move on. Ralph, you got something?" It's an incredibly managed theatrical farce. And it's incredible to me that people are playing along with it. And they say that they're playing along with it because they're afraid of losing access. You don't have any access! There's nothing to lose!

MOYERS: People say, "Jon Stewart speaks for the middle man. He speaks for guys between the left and the right." And yet, I sometimes think you're letting the American people off too

easily. They watch all of this cable stuff.

STEWART: No. But this is...

MOYERS: And they vote for these politicians.

STEWART: No. They vote... less than 50 percent of the country. The country is, look, the general dialogue is being swayed by the people who are ideologically driven.

The five percent on each side that are so ideological driven that they will dictate the terms of the discussion. The other 90 percent of the country have lawns to mow, and kids to pick up from schools, and money to make, and things to do. Their lives are, they have entrusted... we live in a representative democracy.

And so, we elect representatives to go do our bidding, so that we can get the leaves out of the gutter, and do the things around the house that need to be done. What the representatives have done over 200 years is set up a periphery — I think they call it the Beltway — that is obtuse enough that we can't penetrate it anymore, unless we spend all of our time. This is the way that it's been set up purposefully by both sides. In the financial industry, as well. They don't want average people to easily penetrate the workings because then we call them on it.

MOYERS: In the interest of full disclosure...

STEWART: Yes.

MOYERS: ...I do want people to understand that you do not pass yourself off as Walter Lippman.

STEWART: No.

MOYERS: Am I right? Here's a clip.

[VIDEO CLIP]:

Stewart: But we are at war, and we here at THE DAILY SHOW will do our best to keep you informed of any late-breaking... humor we can find. Of course, our show is obviously at a disadvantage compared to the many news sources that we're competing with... at a disadvantage in several respects. For one thing, we are fake. They are not. So in terms of credibility we are, well, oddly enough, actually about even. We're about even.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

STEWART: I feel bad looking at that. I mean, I don't mean to disparage. There's tremendously talented, smart people in the news industry.

MOYERS: But I look at that, and I think there's no hope for me.

STEWART: Well, that's why I'm here today. This is really an intervention, Bill.

MOYERS: I'm ready.

STEWART: No.

MOYERS: You need a straight man?

STEWART: It's got to start. I am the straight man. That's the beautiful thing about being on my show.

I am surrounded by such talented people that I literally, I can just sit there, and advance the script. I am Dr. Exposition on the show. I just advance the script and then they take it from there.

MOYERS: Jon Stewart, THE DAILY SHOW. Thank you for joining us on NOW.

STEWART: Thank you very much. It was a pleasure to be here.

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