

Too Insufferable for Professional Satirists

BY PENN JILLETTE

AS SOMEONE WHO USES COMEDY FOR A LIVING, I take notice of news stories that are too funny or too messed up for good comedians to touch. If a punter chuckles when hearing a news story, the pros should stay away; if Connie Chung smiles, run away.

Remember Clinton's admitting that he smoked dope but he didn't inhale? The instant you read that news, you knew that every hack comedian in the country would be all over it. But no good comedian would touch it; the jokes would be too obvious, too easy. "I didn't inhale" became a cliché punch line instantly. It was all cheerleader laughs: "Hey, we all smoke dope, and we know the president lies, right? Woo-hoo."

I never did a joke on it. Not because I'm a good comedian—I didn't have to get to that self-assessment stage. I simply didn't have a dog in the fight. I've never used marijuana or any other recreational drug or alcohol in my life. Never. (Don't worry, I'm with y'all politically—I want all drugs to be legal. I just don't want them around me—you know, like Merchant Ivory videos.)

I lie for a living, but I tell the truth about that. My knowledge of lying and my sobriety, together, led me to the opinion that "I didn't inhale" was one of the only times Slick Willy ever told the truth in public. Being an anti-dope guy, when I'm offered a toke of a doobie (drug slang is so cool-sounding), I don't just say, "No thank you," I say, "Why don't you truck somewhere else and light up and look all around, Spicoli. Go listen to what's left of the Dead, you hippy loser." I've seen the other kind of non-druggies—the posers who hold the dope up to their lips and then pass it on, hoping they can fake the snacking and giggling. They don't want to make waves. They are the same losers who carry a martini around at a party, just to be seen sipping. Sadly, I believe Clinton had so little backbone that he wouldn't even admit to his buddies that he didn't want a hit of Mary Jane.

Here's where my expertise as a liar comes in: Why did he say something as stupid as "I didn't inhale"? Because he was telling the truth, for a change. When a habitual liar does a little bit of truth, he starts tripping harder than Brian Wilson during "Pet Sounds." He loses his judgment and is no longer careful. The world was Bill's sandbox. Truth is power, and that's what liars

want. I believe that Clinton didn't inhale. Of the two main choices—smoking dope or not smoking dope—Bill made the true politician's choice and did the impotent thing. That's funny and messed-up—so much so that you can't joke about it.

That brings me to the Terrorism Information and Prevention Service. TIPS is so boffo that quality stand-ups and satirists can't make a crack on it. There now are Rita Rudner-style jokes everywhere about cable guys coming around less often than the CIA—just awful material.

For that matter, civil libertarians can't crack on TIPS either.

What can they say? Even Michael Moore could find the correct side of this issue. The illiterate had "George Orwell" at the TIPS of their tongues as soon as it was announced. My usually non-political friends were logging onto the citizencorps.gov website just to clog it with bogus reports of terrorist cars that changed lanes without signaling, and swarthy neighbors who played the Dead audibly. TIPS is such a bad, anti-freedom idea that it turns architects into political performance artists.

What do we liberty lovers do now? Where's our move on this chessboard? We

can't make jokes—they're too obvious.

I start feeling like events are punishing me for screaming "wolf." Lots of times in arguments on some new tough-on-crime government policy, I've said, "Yeah, and this will just lead to turning neighbors into spies." Now they've come right out and done that. What do I say now, "Oh yeah, well this getting-civilians-to-spy-on-their-neighbors thing is going to turn neighbors into spies"? Hyperbole becomes tautology. Yeah, Clinton really didn't inhale and, yeah, we're really going to spy on each other.

You would think that, after all the bad TIPS jokes and all the incredulity, the federal pigs would say, "Just kidding." (That kinda sorta worked for a minute on the Clinton health care plan.) But instead, all they gave us was, "It's just a referral agency."

So, what do we do? Maybe the real reason it's hard to get laughs out of this is because losing our country's freedom and dignity just isn't that goddamn funny.

And, if that's not funny, did you notice this other WAY unfunny thing? We just heard Bush say, "Work is the pathway to dignity and freedom." Well, Buck, how's your German—does "Arbeit Macht Frei" ring a bell? Too obvious to be funny?

Maybe it's time to apply for a job in a tragedy club. **R**



Penn Jillette is the louder, bigger half of the magic/comedy team of Penn & Teller. He is a Cato Institute H.L. Mencken Research Fellow and a longtime libertarian activist.

KEVIN TUMA