

Late-night Comedy Analysis: Osama bin Laden

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Osama bin Laden was of interest to me because I was curious about how late-night comedians would find a way to make jokes about him. 9/11 is a sensitive topic that is inappropriate to joke about, even now. It would be horribly offensive to survivors, loved ones and the general American public to make jokes about 9/11. However, this was one of the biggest news stories at the time and late night comedians had to find a way to mention it. This created a tricky situation for late-night comedians as they are unable to directly joke about one of the biggest events in American history. This led to them making fun of bin Laden as he was an easy target who could be used to make jokes about a variety of topics. In a way, creating jokes about someone like Osama bin Laden helped the country with the healing process after 9/11. Being able to make fun of the person and group responsible for 9/11 helped maintain the image of the United States as a strong nation. It takes strength in the face of tragedy to be able to still use

comedy to bring people together. As a country, we were united in the aftermath of 9/11, and jokes like the ones made about bin Laden helped us stay united during the long search leading up to his death. Late-night comedians used their jokes for a variety of purposes. They made fun of bin Laden's appearance and lifestyle, American celebrities and politicians, and how long it took to kill bin Laden. While the jokes about bin Laden may or may not be entirely factual, they provided excellent content for late-night shows. Between September 2001 and September 2013, late-night comedians told over 600 jokes¹ containing the words "Osama" or "Osama bin Laden" and almost 1400 jokes containing "bin Laden" containing both terms. This essay analyzes some of the jokes told about Osama bin Laden during this period.

A popular category of jokes about Osama bin Laden involved his lifestyle and culture. How the US sees itself is reflected in the way jokes are told about Afghanistan. We see the US as superior, leading to jokes about how backward Afghanistan and the middle east are. Even though 1 "Jokes."

Osama bin Laden was incredibly wealthy, we cannot see him using his money for anything other than buying donkeys and improving his cave system. This was a popular joke with late-night comedians. Jokes 1 and 2 rely on the assumption that owning more donkeys increases your social status in Afghanistan and surrounding areas.

1. "More and more details coming out about Osama bin Laden. Did you know he is the richest man in Afghanistan? Did you know that? He is so rich -- he has a three donkey garage." (Jay Leno Friday, October 5, 2001).
2. "And the FBI announced today they are now looking for Osama bin Ladens financial adviser. You think this guy is in demand? How good a financial adviser can he be? His top client is living in a cave, driving a donkey." (Leno, November 2001)
3. "CNN is arranging to interview Osama bin Laden. Isn't that weird? Yeah, yeah, apparently, bin Laden says he trusts CNN, because Larry Kings the only man whos had more

wives than hes had." (O'Brien, October 2001)

4. "Did you know one of bin Ladens wives is also his first cousin? Hes married to his first cousin. See, that explains why he prefers living in southern Afghanistan." (Leno, November 2001)

Some of the other jokes that are used to make the Middle East look like a lesser region are the jokes about bin Laden's wives. Since this is something that is not typical in American culture, it became popular to make jokes about. Jokes 3 and 4 use the fact that bin Laden had multiple wives and that one was reported to be his first cousin. This category of jokes was popular because it played on the differences between American culture and how the general population perceived bin Laden and his culture. By looking at these jokes, we are able to see how the United States sees the Middle East and in turn how we see ourselves. Americans have a hard time believing that people from "lesser" countries are able to afford things like cars and nice houses. The idea that America is one of the strongest and best countries continues to be present in other jokes. This underlying sentiment impacts a lot of the comments made on bin Laden and on late night comedy shows in general.

Interestingly, one of the most common punchlines that involved Osama bin Laden used the fact that he lived in a cave. This led to jokes comparing him to Batman as they were both millionaires who lived in a cave. Jokes 5 through 8 are all directly related to bin Laden and what his life would be like while living in a cave. Despite the fact that bin Laden's caves were believed to be large and upgraded, most of these jokes rely on him living in a small cave without electricity.

5. "Have you ever seen this Osama bin Laden guy? Do you know how tall he is? He is

6'5". Hes a big guy. 6'5". Thats got to be tough being that tall, living in a cave. Banging your head all day. In fact, its not even a turban he wears, its gauze." (Leno, October 2001)

6. "Have you folks seen the creepy picture of Osama bin Laden in the newspaper wearing his Timex wrist watch? Why would this guy possibly need a watch? He lives in a cave. What the hell does he need a watch for? He lives in a cave. Its either night or day. Thats it." (Letterman, October 2001)
7. "You know, it seems like every day were learning more and more about Osama bin Laden. Here is what we know about this guy, he lives in a cave and every morning he gets up bright and early and changes the bat litter." (Letterman, November 2001)
8. "Well, Over in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden stuck his head out of the cave and saw his shadow so that means six more weeks of bombing." (Letterman, November 2001)

Jokes 9 and 10 expand on the fact that bin Laden lives in a cave and compares him to Batman. These jokes highlight the similarities between Batman and Osama bin Laden focusing on the fact that they are both wealthy and live in a cave. While these jokes were popular, they were not extremely factual. Bin Laden did live in a cave for a period of time but it was nowhere near how it was portrayed in popular culture and jokes 1-10.

9. "And this bin Laden guy is creepy, isn't he? Remember the old days, when the only millionaire living in a cave was Batman?" (Leno, October 2001)
10. "The new Batman movie opens up this weekend. ... You folks know Batman, of course. He is the rich whacko that lives in a cave that is not Osama bin Laden." (Letterman, June 2005)

During the battle of Tora Bora, bin Laden and Al-Qaeda used a series of caves to hide from military forces. These caves were reported to be large, upgraded caverns that could hold over a thousand people and contained "a bakery, a hotel with overstuffed furniture, a hospital with an

ultrasound machine, a library, a mosque...”² They also supposedly had wired electricity and used hydroelectric power. However, the caves were not as big and luxurious as Americans believed. Once American journalists were able to access the Tora Bora caves, they found “rough bunkers embedded deep into the mountain” with no traces of the reported amenities. While the caves were man-made, they were simple bunkers that prioritized function. These chambers served a purpose for Al-Qaeda, but they were nowhere near how they were presented in popular American culture. However, late-night comedy was commonly influenced by what was happening in both global politics and American culture.

Not all of the jokes mentioning Bin Laden are directly related to him. Many use his name in order to make a joke about something else. A common example of this is using bin Laden in order to make fun of a president or their administration. These jokes help show what the American public thought about their government officials at the time. President George W. Bush was a common topic for jokes as he was in office during 9/11. Jokes 11 and 12 focus on Bush getting a colonoscopy and finding bin Laden during the procedure. These jokes use both a current event, Bush’s colonoscopy, and the growing disappointment with how hard it has been to

2 “Bin Laden, Tora Bora.”

find Osama bin Laden. Joke 13 focuses on Bush’s policies by asking why he is focusing on things that are not related to finding Osama bin Laden.

11. "And finally, as we speak, President Bush is preparing to undergo a colon exam. Wow! I guess he was serious when he said he would go to any lengths to find bin Laden."
(Kilborn, July 2002)

12. "President Bush scheduled to under go a colonoscopy, tomorrow. You never know where that Osama bin Laden might be hiding. Hey, and if he’s gonna be anywhere, thats where he’s is, believe me." (Leno, July 2002)

13. "The Bush Administration now says it wants to restore food stamps to all immigrants

who are here legally. A legal immigrant. And you thought it was hard finding Osama bin Laden. Yeah. Good luck." (Leno, January 2002)

All of the jokes about President Bush use Osama bin Laden as a way to question or take a jab at Bush's bigger policies and actions. However, jokes about Former President Bill Clinton focus on something more personal. Clinton was not in office during 9/11 and the hunt for bin Laden so there is not content related to both his administration and bin Laden. Jokes 14 and 15 both used a bin Laden reference to take a jab at Clinton's sex life, a common topic for late-night comedians.

14. "Counter-terrorism experts are now saying that Osama bin Laden may be hiding secret messages on pornographic web sites. You know what that means? Clinton could find this guy before Bush does." (Leno, July 2002)

15. "And they say bin Laden never spends the night in the same place twice. Wait a minute. That's Clinton. Forget that." (Letterman October 2001)

By making false comparisons between Clinton and bin Laden, late-night comedians are able to make fun of Clinton by using his actions as a punchline and using the name of someone who most Americans hate.

There were not many topics that late-night comedians did not find a way to joke about. They made jokes about bin Laden's appearance and his beard. This was one of his defining physical features and late-night comedians used it for a variety of jokes. Jokes 16 and 17 suggest that bin Laden had a lot of food left in his beard. Jokes 18 and 19 make fun of bin Laden for dyeing his beard to look younger in videos that he released. These jokes are very similar to the types of jokes about American celebrities used in late-night shows. By suggesting that bin Laden has a dirty beard, it is easy to make him seem less serious. This is one of the way that late-night

comedy related to bin Laden helped reduce the threat of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

16. "Bin Laden is older now. I think hes 50 years old, and hes starting to get a little salt and pepper in his beard. He also has some mustard, ketchup and hummus." (Letterman, March 2007)
17. "Heres more bad news. You know that Osama bin Laden? Experts now say that it looks like the guy will probably survive the winter. And you know how hes going to do it? Well, they think hes just going to eat all the food stuck in his beard. Hell be fine." (Letterman, November 2001)
18. "Did you notice -- that is the latest picture of bin Laden, and do you notice his beard is now black? Didnt it used to be gray? I think hes dyeing it. Forget...the Mideast crisis. I think hes having a mid-life crisis." (Leno, September 2007)
19. "Anyway, experts say based on the videos taken from Bin Ladens compound, we now know he dyed his beard ... although I think its pretty much washed off by now, Dont you think?" (Leno, May 2011)

Making fun of bin Laden's physical appearance makes Americans less likely to take him seriously. This decreases bin Laden's impact on the general public and works against his videos and other messages. Joking about bin Laden dyeing his beard may make him seem more relatable to some viewers, but generally shows that bin Laden is getting older and may not be as big of a threat even if the United States is unable to find him. Joking about the physical effects of aging on bin Laden gives late-night comedians another way to get the American public to take him less seriously.

American late-night hosts were stuck in a **catch-22** with Osama bin Laden. It would be too offensive to joke about 9/11 but it was one of the biggest news stories at the time. This caused them to turn to creating jokes about bin Laden himself rather than 9/11 or other attacks. In order to be able to joke about someone who killed so many Americans, we have to have a

good sense of humor as a country. It would make the United States look weaker if we were unable to joke about Osama bin Laden and chose to ignore him completely. Bin Laden provided a unique opportunity for late-night comedians. They did not need to worry about what jokes they could make like with other major world leaders. Due to the nature of the relationship between the United States and Osama bin Laden, there would not be as big of an impact if jokes were offensive. It was not a public policy concern if Americans had negative feelings about bin Laden. If late-night comedians decided to tell offensive jokes about a world leader that tainted the American public's view of that leader and their country, it could be problematic for American politicians. Since this was not a concern with bin Laden, no jokes were off limit and they were able to use bin Laden to indirectly comment on different social problems in the United States. The jokes told about bin Laden had more to do with American culture and how we see ourselves than it had to do with bin Laden himself. This America centered viewpoint is prevalent in many forms of media and late-night comedy is no exception to this.

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