Archie Bunker for President: The Strange Career of a Political Icon in Moynihan's America

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In a 2015 interview with the legendary television producer Norman Lear, comedian Larry Wilmore asked him if he felt responsible for having Archie Bunker running for president, alluding to the controversial candidacy of Donald Trump. During the election, Lear compared Trump to Archie several times. "He IS Archie Bunker," he proclaimed in 2016 calling the Republican nominee "the middle finger of the American right hand (McCaskill 2016)." But Lear is not the only one making the association; in fact, the comparison has become something of a cliché of the 2016 election. On the face of it, comparisons between the Republican nominee and the main character of the seventies sitcom *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–1979) may seem odd. But the character Lear created to represent, and ridicule, a "rancid, lights-out conservatism," became a lasting political icon unlike any other sitcom character (Lear 2014, 248). This article traces the history of the political uses of, and reactions to, this icon.

Archie Bunker (played by Carroll O'Connor) was the blue-collar blowhard who together with his long-suffering and naïve wife Edith (Jean Stapleton), housed their newly-married daughter Gloria (Sally Struthers) and her husband Mike (Rob Reiner) as he gets his degree in sociology. The set up guaranteed much of the political humor as the reactionary and bigoted Archie clashed with the new liberalism of the younger generation. Indeed, the show presented political content in a way previously unseen in television entertainment. Within a year, the show became the most watched program on television, a spot it would hold for a record-breaking five years.

Due to the political nature and popularity of the show, the character of Archie Bunker soon became a powerful and contested political icon. Politically, Archie Bunker represented the urban, blue-collar whites who turned their back on the Democratic Party during the 1960s and 1970s, instead embracing the populist conservatism of George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan.[1] But while the protests of his neighboring hardhats were dismissively labeled *Canarsieism* in the press, Archie was a beloved character in tens of millions of households (Rieder 1985, 2). Archie was, however, controversial. At the urging of CBS, early episodes began with an announcement stating how the show "seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show – in a mature fashion – just how absurd they are (McCrohan 1987, 33)."

The creators intended to satirize bigotry and reactionary politics, but were instead accused of peddling racism themselves. For every review praising the show, there was another questioning whether television comedy could battle prejudice, or did the attempts of Lear and company in fact "make it more acceptable (Adler 1979, xxv)?" Carroll O'Connor, himself a staunch liberal, captured the essence of the debate: "We thought we were making people laugh at racism, [executive director of the National Urban League Whitney] Young thought we were treating it like a joke (O'Connor 1999, 167)." In the *New York Times*, novelist Laura Z. Hobson, author of *Gentleman's Agreement*, criticized how the show depicted Archie as a "lovable bigot," to which Lear replied "a lovable bigot [...] helps us all to laugh at ourselves and view our own behavior with new insight (McCrohan 1987, 192–194)." Despite fears that the show encouraged or spread bigotry, research suggests the vast majority of viewers understood the satire and rejected the prejudice of Archie (von Hodenberg 2015, 238–248).

Norman Lear, himself a liberal, was keen to let the show satirize populist conservatism and present his liberal politics to the audience. According to Virginia Carter, who headed the relations with advocacy groups and politics for the production company, the producers and writers made sure to reach out to political interests for accurate storylines (Montgomery 1989, 71–72). Carter's efforts proved successful; in 1973 the progressive Democrat Frank Church took to the Senate floor to praise how the sitcom had portrayed the challenges facing old people in the United States. "[T]he 'All in the Family' show made many of the points which the Senate Committee on Aging and I, as its chairman, attempt to make in reports and speeches," Church announced (Church 1973, 32700–32701). By 1978, when the Smithsonian Institution selected Archie's and Edith's chairs to be preserved as "part of the cultural legacy of our country," *All in the Family* was widely hailed by Democrats and liberals. In Congress, Democratic Senators Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Alan Cranston, William Proxmire, and James Abourezk praised the show effusively. Senator Proxmire even claimed the show had "done more to diminish prejudice and bias, by getting people to laugh at the prejudices we hold, than almost any other action that has taken place in the last 10 years (Proxmire 1978, 29972–29973)." Proxmire's praise

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must be understood as hyperbole, yet underscores how popular the show was—especially for those on the political Left. At the White House, President Jimmy Carter, a fan of the satire, hosted the creators and cast of the sitcom, happy to bask in the glory of the show.

Six years earlier, the liberal Mayor of New York City, John Lindsay, had won the endorsement of Archie Bunker in his quest for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Technically the endorsement came from Carroll O'Connor, not the fictive Archie Bunker. "He can't actually endorse him in character, but he uses some language [in the television advertisements] that will make it recognizable," explained a Lindsay spokesperson (van Gieson 1972, 15). As Representative James Abourezk proclaimed in the House, Lindsay and eventual nominee George McGovern were both courting the "Archie Bunker vote," without resorting to the racial rhetoric of George Wallace (Abourezk 1972, 11227–11230).

When Senator Edward Kennedy challenged President Carter in 1980, he also used the endorsement of O'Connor to channel Archie Bunker in television ads. Kennedy was appealing to what became known as the Reagan Democrats dismayed by Carter's handling of the economy, the oil crisis, and the hostage situation in Iran. "Archie Bunker is a blue-collar person struggling to make ends meet [...] he makes a very effective messenger for what we're trying to say," a Kennedy adviser explained (Weinraub 1980, 24). To that end, the bigot from Queens still served a purpose within the Democratic coalition.

CONSERVATIVES AND ARCHIE BUNKER

While the initial criticism of *All in the Family* came from liberals uneased by the portrayal of Archie as a "lovable bigot," the producers soon found themselves under attack from the Right. From the start, conservatives were dismayed by the ridicule of their ideas and their constituents. William F. Buckley, for example, complained how conservatism was presented as "intrinsically loony, prejudiced and anti-intellectual (McCrohan 1987, 189)." Even though *All in the Family* represented the low culture of television sitcoms, the popularity of the show made conservatives realize the importance of the politics of television entertainment.

President Richard Nixon hated how the show portrayed Archie, whom he recognized as a "hard hat," as a slob and a fool. Nixon, who spent much time on the idea of his Silent Majority and the re-imagining of the Forgotten Man, saw in Archie ridicule of his political vision. "I turned the goddamn thing off," Nixon exclaimed after having lamented the liberal agenda of the show to H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman (Nixon 1971). Archie Bunker was a representation of the Silent Majority beyond the control of Nixon, something the president found unacceptable, especially as it was at the center of the most popular show on television. Nixon had, in fact, cultivated an entertainment strategy, most famously appearing on the popular variety show *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (Brownell 2014, 188–190). Now, *All in the Family* seemed to erase all that work on image, and the White House was not going to take it sitting down.

The Nixon administration had a strained relationship with the media from the beginning. With Vice-President Spiro Agnew as the main attack dog, Nixon believed in intimidating and harassing both individual reporters and the institutions and businesses behind them (Porter 1976). As Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out in a 1971 article on the relationship between the presidency and the press, the president has the ability to manipulate and steer the news (Moynihan 1971). This advantage, as Nixon was about to discover, did not translate to satire and television entertainment. Although Charles Colson called both the network and the production company to complain about liberal bias, there was little business incentive for CBS to demand changes to the number one show on television. In fact, Norman Lear testified at a Senate subcommittee hearing on "Freedom of the Press," declaring he felt free to take on even controversial political issues in his sitcom (Lear 1972).

Only a couple years later the atmosphere changed with the introduction of the Family Viewing Hour. "This is censorship [...] it is occurring everyday with ideas, too," Lear told the House Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Communications (Waxman 1976a, 35460).

The fall of *All in the Family* started with the political fight over the Family Viewing Hour in 1975, when network executives bended to growing political pressure and threats of boycotts and asked Lear to change the content of the show. Lear refused. Despite his protests CBS moved the most popular show on television to a lesser timeslot. "I wish you could see the kind of pressure we're getting [...] I'm not talking about crank calls and letter-writing campaigns. You would be impressed by the people who are phoning in and complaining about *All in the Family*," CBS Television head Robert Wood explained to Lear about the Family Viewing Hour (Cowan 1979, 41). *All in the Family* did not lose its position as the most watched show on television until after moving from the Saturday eight o'clock timeslot. Often described as an audience reaction to repetitive writing and political fatigue, the impact of the Family Viewing Hour on this development has been underestimated. The controversial viewing policy, which was deemed unconstitutional following a lawsuit spearheaded by Lear, was the result of political pressure from Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, grassroots organizations, and conservative owners of affiliate stations. "I gather that there was seeming or imagined or real pressure, Congressional, which I suppose means it starts even before

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that from people somewhere, through to the FCC," television producer Grant Tinker testified (Waxman 1976b, 35505). Even regardless of motive and impact on audiences, it remains clear that the Family Viewing Hour hit *All in the Family* and Norman Lear hard. By design or not, the people behind *All in the Family* understood it as a political attack (Cowan 1979, 179). Conservative grassroots organizing against *All in the Family* and immorality on television proved fruitful as the new policy "completely changed the direction of television for the remainder of the decade (Castleman and Podrazik 2010, 256)."

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THE LEGACY

In the spring of 1983, CBS announced the end of Archie Bunker's reign on television.[2] Geraldine Ferraro, the Democrat representing Queens, took to the floor of Congress to praise Archie, saying his "significance transcends cultural interests (Ferraro 1983, 13199)." Even with Archie off the air, Democrats continued to hold him up as satire of the conservative movement. Bill Clinton echoed Senator Proxmire when he in the 1990s praised Norman Lear for taking bigotry "apart, and, in the process, made us laugh out loud (Clinton 1999)." Using Archie as a symbol of a fool and a bigot was and remains commonplace on the Left: in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, a reader objected to the paper's controversial endorsement of Daniel Patrick Moynihan for the Senate calling him "an Archie Bunker with academic credentials (Brown 1976, 24, Andelic 2014, 1127–1128)." The comparisons between Donald Trump and Archie Bunker can also be understood as examples of using the character to ridicule the right-wing.

By 2016, however, the lovable bigot was no longer dismissed by the right-wing. A change had taken place since intellectual conservatives and grassroots activists joined in denouncing the character in the 1970s. William F. Buckley, William Rusher, and Richard Nixon all dismissed Archie Bunker as unfair ridicule of the conservative movement and ideals, as did conservative activists from Brooklyn to Boston (Frisk 2011; Geismer 2015, 208). "They tell you you are Archie Bunkers. You are not Archie Bunkers. You are great Americans," a New York City radio host told the working-class Italians who rejected liberalism in the 1970s (Rieder 1985, 205). Four decades later, right-wing activists proudly use clips, quotes, memes, and the imagery of Archie Bunker. Instead of being understood as satire of conservatism, the crudeness of the character made him an icon. In 2016, the same crudeness and bigotry is seen as a bold stance against "political correctness." Even high positioned supporters of Trump likened him to the lovable bigot. Carl Icahn, the businessman, claimed the people supporting Donald Trump were the "Archie Bunkers of the world," praising these voters as being "smart guys" (Hensch 2016).

Part of this change is the conservatives and Republicans "re-creat[ing] themselves as the authentic representatives of average white Americans," by adopting the populist rhetoric of George Wallace (Kazin 1995, 246). Part of it is the emergence of populist conservative media provocateurs, especially the success of Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s (Hemmer 2016, 260–272). As Limbaugh reached remarkable success within the conservative movement with his understanding of how to blend entertainment and politics, a reader of the *New York Times* suggested he should be viewed with the "same affection (and sympathy) heretofore accorded the now-absent Archie Bunker (Harris 1993, H6)." The culmination of populist conservatism in the Tea Party movement, combined with the achievements of media agitators like Limbaugh, paved the way for the subsequent election of Donald Trump (Formisano 2012).

Today, "Archie Bunker for President"—the slogan on parody campaign buttons and t-shirts in the 1970s—is more relevant than ever.

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NOTES

1. For more on this political shift, see Kazin 1995, McGirr 2001, and Cowie 2010.
2. Since 1979, the show went under the name *Archie Bunker's Place*.

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