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Laugh, or the World Laughs at You



PUNCH LINES From left, Mike Brown as himself, Tina Fey as Gov. Sarah Palin and Darrell Hammond as President Bill Clinton.

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St. Louis — Political custom demands that before every [presidential debate](#), campaign aides must spend much time and energy “raising expectations” for their opponent. They will go on about how masterly a debater the opponent is, so as to fatten him or her up for a post-debate skewering (while hailing their own candidate as a genius-slayer).

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“There are certain people who once they become joke topics, they are forever joke topics,” said Robert Lichter, president of the **Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University**. According to Mr. Lichter, since Mr. McCain picked Ms. Palin to be his running mate on Aug. 29 until the debate, Mr. Leno and Mr. Letterman made her the butt of 180 jokes — or more than the other three principals on the two tickets combined in that period (16 jokes for Mr. Biden; 26 for Mr. Obama; and 106 for Mr. McCain). About a third of the Palin jokes came in the three days preceding the debate as damage grew from the Couric interview.

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New-on-the-scene politicians are more prone to being overtaken by their parodies.

“Vice presidents can be particularly vulnerable,” said Mr. Lichter, who mentions Vice President [Dan Quayle](#) as one who never fully recovered from the mockery that greeted his debut in 1988. It can also extend to running mates, like Adm. James Stockdale, [Ross Perot](#)’s No. 2, who today is better remembered for his doddering debate performance in 1992 than his heroic career. Politicians at the center of sex scandals enter a particularly unforgiving punch-line purgatory. (You think Mr. Stewart or [Conan O’Brien](#) are ever going to talk about [John Edwards](#), [Gary Hart](#) or [Eliot Spitzer](#) for their policy ideas?)

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Comics love fresh moose-kill. “Sarah Palin is so great because she brings in the potential for so many new kinds of jokes,” Mr. Lichter said. “You don’t have to do the same ‘Bush is stupid,’ ‘Clinton is fat’ or ‘McCain is old’ jokes,” he said. “You can do something on how she is perky and attractive, or the lipstick on a pig line or whatever. You can almost feel her regenerating the comedy writers.”

Ms. Palin also has the distinct advantage — or disadvantage — of looking a lot like “Saturday Night Live’s” [Tina Fey](#), which saddled her with an instant association with someone who is not to be taken seriously.

“Tina Fey was the first thing people thought of, which was not going to be good for her,” said Mr. Orben. To wit, Mr. Letterman previewed Ms. Palin’s debate performance with a Top 10 list of “Things Overheard at Palin Debate Camp” on Wednesday night.

Number One: “Any way we can just get Tina Fey to do it?”

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