

What will the satirists do without Bush?

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By CNN's Mairi Mackay

LONDON, England (CNN) -- Once the race has been won, as the election night balloons deflate and the last revellers wearily leave watch parties around America; perhaps then, back at the ranch, George W. Bush might settle down with a bowl of pretzels to watch his actions real and fictional played out by Josh Brolin in "W."

If he does, he'll see Oliver Stone present him as a belligerent, war-mongering cowboy, short on intellect but not on charisma. What he surely won't fail to notice, though, is the gentle mockery that infuses Stone's biopic.

From the multitudinous close-ups of Dubya's patriotic belt buckles stamped with the White House insignia, to his Bushisms, the movie has a strong undercurrent of satire. At times Stone's presentation becomes almost absurd: like the scene in the Oval Office where Dubya chomps inattentively on "freedom fries" as Dick Cheney slides a crucial policy decision past him.

But as we smirk at Stone's presentation, it's worth remembering Dubya has presided over some of the most epic events in recent history -- 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricanes Katrina and Ike and, most recently, the Wall Street meltdown.

Stone explains his approach, saying: "I've tried to make politics more entertaining." Certainly our politicians have never been sacred and "W." is just the latest in a long line of satiric pokes at Bush.

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Bush has not just been lampooned in the movies -- tongue-in-cheek digs at Dubya and his administration have come from the stage, the pages of novels, and particularly the small screen in late-night TV comedies such as "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" and "Saturday Night Live" (where he is played by comedian Will Ferrell), which have proved to be particularly good barometers of politicians' standing with the electorate. It would seem that Bush has become one of the most parodied presidents in modern history.

But things were not always so. In the early days of his presidency in 2002, shortly after 9/11, there was a feeling that the United States was a country under attack and that somehow irony had died.

"There was a time when he was untouchable," Tom Patterson, Professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government told CNN in a telephone interview. "It squeezed the life out of political humour."

By 2004, the year Bush ran for re-election against Democratic candidate, Senator John Kerry, the situation in Iraq was continuing to deteriorate and doubts about the existence of weapons of mass destruction began to arise.

Between convention and the general election, crucial electioneering time, Bush was the butt of jokes on late night TV comedies on no less than 261 occasions, almost twice as many times as rival Kerry, according to figures from the Center for Media and Public Affairs.

The satirists' gloves were slowly starting to come off.

On the big screen, 2004 was also a turning point year for Bush satires. As well as "Silver City," Michael Moore's controversial and widely-acclaimed documentary about Bush and the War on Terror, "Fahrenheit 9/11"

opened. It is still the highest-grossing political satire of the last 30 years, having pulled in just over \$119 million worldwide.

What is it about Bush that attracts audiences to comic vengeance?

"Almost everything," says Patterson. "Secrecy, lack of openness. That's a wonderful invitation to satire.

"When things go bad they really have an inviting target -- Iraq has gone badly, the economy ..."

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"It doesn't seem as telling and funny when the targets aren't as juicy. Humour needs to have context to give it real bite. The targets are critical."

Which is why, if Obama wins Tuesday, the likes of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert might be in for a tough time.

"Obama is going to be a hard one," says Patterson. "They haven't worked out how to deal with Obama because he is African-American.

"People aren't going to be looking for the satirists to cut him to pieces. It will be like post-9/11."

It could be that the satirists will be among the people to look back at the office of the 43rd U.S. president with nostalgia. After all, as Stone so neatly puts it: "You could not invent George Bush."

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