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## Palin Gag? Comedy's All in the Mis-Timing

Letterman Contribute, But Hosts All Joked

By Paul Farhi | Washington Post Staff Writer

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Did Sarah Palin not notice when late-night comedians were making fun of her daughter's pregnancy last fall, or did she simply get fed up with one-too-many cracks when a now-contrite David Letterman weighed in last week?

Bristol Palin, the Alaska governor's then-pregnant 17-year-old, was a punch line for almost all of the late-night TV crew -- Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Jon Stewart, as well as Letterman -- almost as soon as her mother was chosen as Sen. John McCain's Republican running mate.

Facing enormous criticism for his Palin-daughter joke, Letterman on his show last night apologized to the Palin family, saying it could not "be defended."

Yet similar jokes never drew much objection from Palin's camp until Letterman's gag last week about Palin's daughter getting "knocked up" by baseball player Alex Rodriguez during a visit to a New York Yankees game -- a line Palin suggested was really a reference to her 14-year-old daughter, Willow, who attended the game.

On Sept. 2, during the presidential campaign, Leno, for example, told this joke on "The Tonight Show": "Governor Palin announced over the weekend that her 17-year-old unmarried daughter is five months pregnant. And you thought John Edwards was in trouble before! Now he has really done it."

On Oct. 10, O'Brien, then host of "Late Night," quipped: "Sarah Palin is going to drop the first puck at the Philadelphia Flyers hockey game. Then Palin will spend the rest of the game trying to keep the hockey players out of her daughter's penalty box."

**While the pregnant-daughter theme was most common on late-night shows during the fall campaign, it has never fully disappeared. And Letterman told far fewer of these jokes than some of his late-night brethren.**

**Through mid-March, Leno had made 15 jokes about the Palin daughter's pregnancy, Stewart had told four on "The Daily Show," and Letterman checked in with eight, according to an analysis of late-night humor by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research organization affiliated with George Mason University.**

**The comedian most likely to bash Bristol Palin? O'Brien, with 20 jokes at her expense.**

"Saturday Night Live" has also parodied the Palin family in questionable ways. In a skit last September, a mock reporter joked about incest in the vice presidential candidate's family, saying, "I mean, come on. It's Alaska!"

Palin not only didn't protest, she appeared as a guest on the program a few weeks later.

So why did Palin ask Letterman -- and only Letterman -- for an apology? And why did she wait until last week?

As it happens, Palin finally got what she was looking for last night, when Letterman offered a lengthy apology and explanation for why his joke went so wrong. He said he understood that his reference was unclear about which daughter he was referring to.

"I told a joke that was beyond flawed, and my intent is completely meaningless compared to the perception," he said. "And since it was a joke I told, I feel that I need to do the right thing here and apologize for having told that joke. It's not your fault that it was misunderstood, it's my fault. . . . So I would like to apologize, especially to the two daughters involved, Bristol and Willow, and also to the governor and her family and everybody else who was outraged by the joke."

It's conceivable that Palin was aware of the late-night jokes made about her daughter during the campaign and wanted to fight back, but kept quiet as a strategic matter, says Tim Graham, the director of media analysis for the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog organization.

"I think the [McCain] campaign said, 'Is that really the fight we want to have?' " he said. "Especially at that point in the campaign, making an issue of it might have [backfired]. They knew that those late-night clips would be on the Sunday morning shows, would be in the blogs and mentioned in the newspapers and everywhere else. So why give the comedians more to work with" by protesting the jokes?

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As a rhetorical strategy, Palin's timing actually makes a great deal of sense, said Richard Vatz, a professor of political communication at Towson University and a self-described conservative. Noting that the pregnant-daughter jokes had been dying down, Letterman's crack stood out, making him easier to isolate for criticism, he said.

"If a large number of people are doing something against you, it's hard to take on the whole group," Vatz said.

What's more, Letterman's use of the phrase "knocked up" made his comment seem especially crude and nasty, said Vatz: "I'm not defending the things that Leno or O'Brien said, but that phrase implies sexuality in a very negative way."

**Even if his anti-Palin jokes have been less numerous than others', Letterman may be a more polarizing figure than other late-night comics -- and thus a ripe target for Palin, says S. Robert Lichter, the CMPA's director. "He's everything that Palin is not. He's urban, he's ironic. More importantly, he's everything that Sarah Palin's supporters aren't. He's becoming the Dan Rather of political comedians."**

One irony in the Palin-Letterman saga: McCain announced his candidacy for president on Feb. 27, 2007, during an appearance on . . . David Letterman's program.

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