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JON STEWART GETS SERIOUS

If You Interview Kissinger, Are You Still a Comedian?

By DAMIEN CAVE

Published: October 24, 2004

Is Jon Stewart being coy?

In a recent dust-up with Tucker Carlson on CNN's "Crossfire," Mr. Stewart defended a soft interview he conducted with John Kerry. He wasn't a commentator on CNN, like Mr. Carlson, he said, but a host on "The Daily Show," which is on Comedy Central.

"The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls," he said.

Whether he likes it or not, Mr. Stewart's mix of news and satire has become so successful that the comedian is suddenly being criticized for not questioning his guests with Tim Russert-like intensity. (It has been that kind of campaign.)

Some critics insist that the size of Mr. Stewart's audience should force him to take a more serious approach. "The Daily Show" now attracts more 18- to 34-year-old viewers than the network news. And the 13-minute CNN segment with Mr. Stewart has been downloaded or streamed from the Internet more than 1.5 million times, surpassing the viewership of "Crossfire" itself.

"Stewart needs to be more self-aware," wrote Dan Kennedy, a media critic at The Boston Phoenix, an alternative magazine, on his blog. "By offering serious media criticism, and then throwing up his hands and saying, in effect, 'Hey, I'm just a comedian' every time Carlson took him on, Stewart came off as slippery and disingenuous. Sorry, Jon, but you can't interview Bill Clinton, Richard Clarke, Bill



Chris Buck

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O'Reilly, Bob Dole, etc., etc., and still say you're just a comedian."

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On his show, Mr. Stewart does tend to hold softball interviews. When Henry Kissinger appeared last year, Mr. Stewart called him "Sir," too much in awe to press him on anything substantive.

And when Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican National Committee, appeared in August, Mr. Stewart begged for an interview with President Bush and promised to be nice.

"I don't make fun of people to their face," he said.

"I know," Mr. Gillespie said. "That's why I'm here."

The "Crossfire" conflict supports the charge that the line between television news and entertainment is blurred beyond all recognition, said Darrell West, a political scientist at Brown University and author of "Celebrity Politics."

"Each side is still uneasy with the other because they have a self image that is different from the reality," he said. "Tucker was complaining that Stewart wasn't being funny. He wasn't wanting commentary, he wanted entertainment. And Stewart wanted to take advantage of the show to make some serious statements."

Even Mr. Carlson admits that Mr. Stewart is something of a political idealist, believing that issues matter. The comedian stayed at CNN for several hours after the show to discuss the issues that he raised on the air.

"It was heartfelt," Mr. Carlson said this week in an interview. "He needed to do this."

Getting more serious doesn't mean buttoning-up. Mr. Stewart's success and access to the youth vote give him the power to press guests without fearing that they will never return to the show, said Lizz Winstead, a co-creator of the show and now a co-host of a news and comedy show on Air America, the liberal radio network.

"Jon should be the guy who asks the satirical questions," she said. "He wouldn't have to nail someone and make them uncomfortable, but since Jon is so brilliant at being satirical, why not say to Richard Perle on the show, 'Did you ever think of calling your book 'Confessions of a Chicken Hawk?'"

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