

Trump, Greta, and the Faint Heartbeat of American Humor

This week Greta Thunberg went to Washington.

Like the legendary [Mr. Smith](#) who went to the capital city before her, Greta was the talk of the town – not only for her youth and uniqueness, but for the guffaws her U.S. debut ignited. Unlike Mr. Smith, whose optimism was the object of ridicule, Greta's pessimism stole the show with scenes like the following:

– *Will Chamberlain (@willchamberlain)* [September 23, 2019](#)

Her speech before the U.N. drew the amusement of a high-profile figure: Donald Trump. Instead of lashing out viciously as he is wont to do, Trump responded to Greta's speech with a bit of tongue-in-cheek Twitter humor:

– *Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump)* [September 24, 2019](#)

One can say a lot about Trump's tweets (they're often nasty, mean, and vicious) and Greta's rhetoric (it seems a bit theatrical), but in this instance, I give them credit. They both took tense situations and turned them into humorous events.

That's a rare occurrence these days, particularly for those in positions of influence. This is because, as journalist Malcolm Muggeridge [explains](#) in a 1958 edition of *Esquire*, "Power, indeed, is inherently ridiculous, and those who traffic in it are rarely, if ever, dowered with much sense of appreciation of humor."

Muggeridge goes on to support this statement with examples

from history:

Lincoln—perhaps the sweetest, certainly the most melancholic ruler of modern times—enjoyed only very rudimentary jokes. As for our contemporary dictators, the single witticism of Mussolini recorded by his son-in-law and foreign minister, Ciano, was made on the occasion of Neville Chamberlain’s death. Hitler and Stalin, as far as we know, neither joked nor appreciated jokes on the part of others, though the Führer occasionally indulged in imitations.

Humor is rare these days because of political correctness constraints. [Mel Brooks](#) and [Carol Burnett](#) have bemoaned this in the past, while [Dave Chappelle](#) is currently fighting this trend with his “Sticks and Stones” show. That Trump and Greta can engage in public lightheartedness is a sign that our society still has an element of freedom to it. To quote Muggeridge again:

In totalitarian societies, humor is virtually abolished, and only exists at all as a kind of Maquis or resistance movement. Krokodil, the official Soviet humorous magazine, is so unfunny as to be painful, and makes the London or New York Times seem, by comparison, a Marx Brothers script.

His next sentence is a wake-up call for Americans: “*Humor, in fact, is an aspect of freedom, without which it cannot exist at all.*”

The glimmers of humor slipping through the cracks – through Trump, Greta, and Chappelle – should give us hope. All is not lost. A few people still know how to laugh at themselves and others. If we continue to fan the flames of humor, our society has a much better chance of remaining free.

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