

Charles McCabe

Himself

What's Funny?

AFTER Finley Peter Dunne, Will Rogers had to be our great political writer. Observe I did not say comic, though both these chaps were comical writers.

Since politics is essentially humanity in the raw, the practice thereof is almost by definition comic. Politicians are funny fellows, even when they are called statesmen. They can be truly perceived only in terms of the ridiculous.

Will Rogers, if I remember correctly, at one time appeared on the first page of The New York Times as a political columnist, sharing days with another strange and wry political humorist, Calvin Coolidge. Both gentlemen were reported to get one buck a word, an incredible figure in those days for mere words.

Rogers was master of a wry, gnomonic one-liner style: "The girls are so beautiful. It's sad to think that 20 years from now they'll all be five years older." Or: "So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip."

Will Rogers also defined, pithily and finally, the craft of the political satirist — a craft so ably practiced today by the two Arts, Hoppe and Buchwald, and a number of other able fellows.

"Give me the truth," Rogers said. "I'll exaggerate it and make it funny." He also said: "I don't make jokes; I just watch the government and report the facts."

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I RECALL Art Hoppe telling me something of his modus operandi. He read a newspaper until he came to some item that he could not understand. He thought about it for a while, and if he still didn't understand it, he wrote a column explaining it to his readers. This is not very far from the Will Rogers approach.

Today we live in times that try men's wits, as well as their souls. The role of the political satirist is not easy at a time when almost every utterance on high seems like self - satire. Mr. Nixon talks about telling the truth as if it were some child's game that he is constantly and patiently explaining to us dumpkops out here in the wasteland.

Mr. Agnew, clutching to his heart the pure and certain knowledge that he is a crook, gave us homilies about the old and disappearing virtues of integrity, truth telling, and flogging the city editor.

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BILLY GRAHAM, the house priest, continues to bombinate about Nixon and God in the same breath. Mark Twain would hardly have dared to send this sort of thing to his publisher.

Characters like Ron Ziegler, adopting much of the manner and even the dress of the Reverend Graham, explain patiently that the boss is telling the truth. That long-suffering lawyer, J. Fred Buzhardt, explains every turn and twist in his client's serpentine case with the resigned air of a man who has just been hit with a baseball bat.

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MR. H. R. HALDEMAN, who plays Bismarck still to Mr. Nixon's Kaiser, is photographed because he is wearing his hair long, which is because his hippie son has promised to wear his shorter if his daddy wears his longer. We are so benumbed by what is going on that this seems to many of us a legitimate item of news. We have the incredible Rose Mary Woods.

When the heat is momentarily great on our Leader, he produces his hole cards, his daughters — to explain that he is really telling the truth. These apotheosized baton - twirlers make quite as much sense on the political scene as Cronkite, Chancellor or anybody else. How can you exaggerate Tricia and Julie to make them funny? The political satirist today is a sober map maker of a lunatic and still uncharted terrain.