

The President as Punchline

Political Humor on Late Night TV During the Bush Years

Since George W. Bush became President in 2001, we have logged 15,400 jokes about public affairs and public figures from the monologues of late night television comics Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien. This issue of *Media Monitor* chronicles the most frequent targets of humor on TV during the first five years of the Bush Presidency. We also compare these results to late night humor during the first five years of Bill Clinton's presidency.

Major Findings:

***Late-Night Bush Bash** Nearly 1 in 4 jokes in 2005 targeted President Bush. *Page 2*

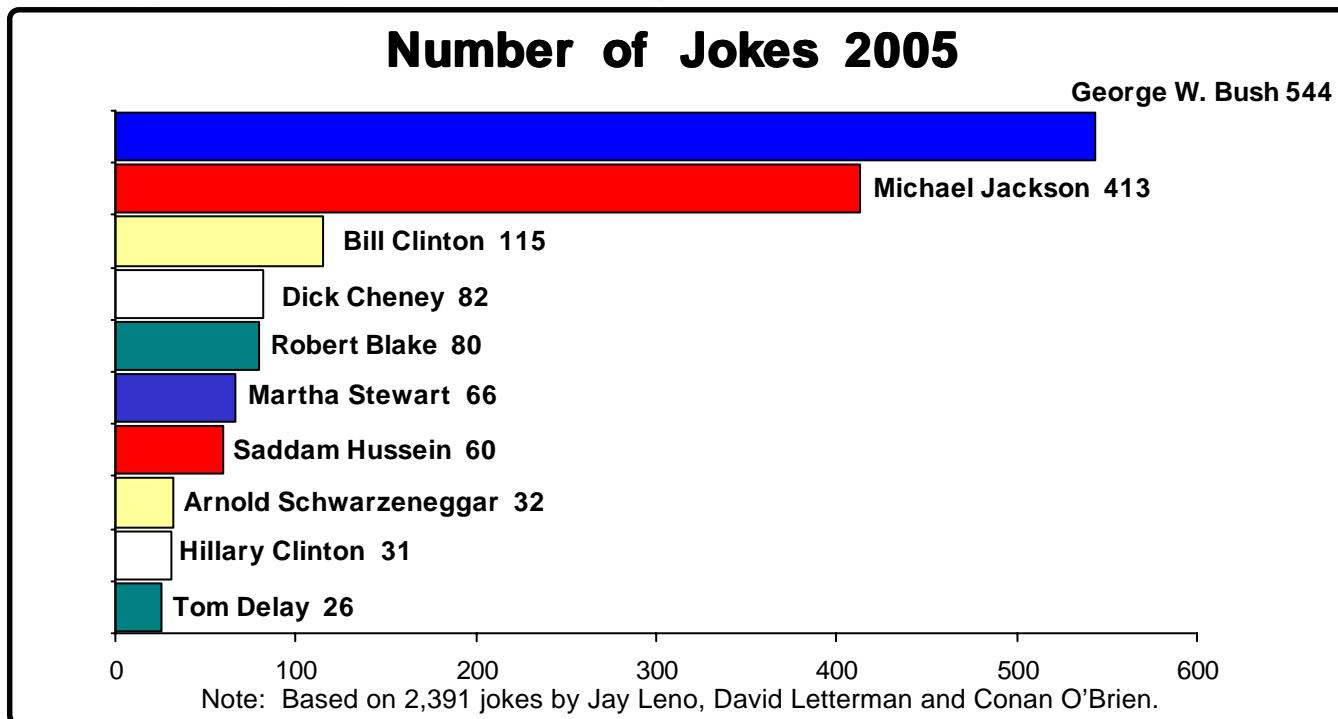
***Comedian's Best Friend** Bush has averaged over 500 jokes per year since 2001. *Page 4*

***The Personal Touch** Personal jokes about the President outnumber jokes about his policies by 3 to 2. *Page 6*

***Stupid White Man?** Over 40% of all jokes portray Bush as stupid or uninformed. *Page 6*

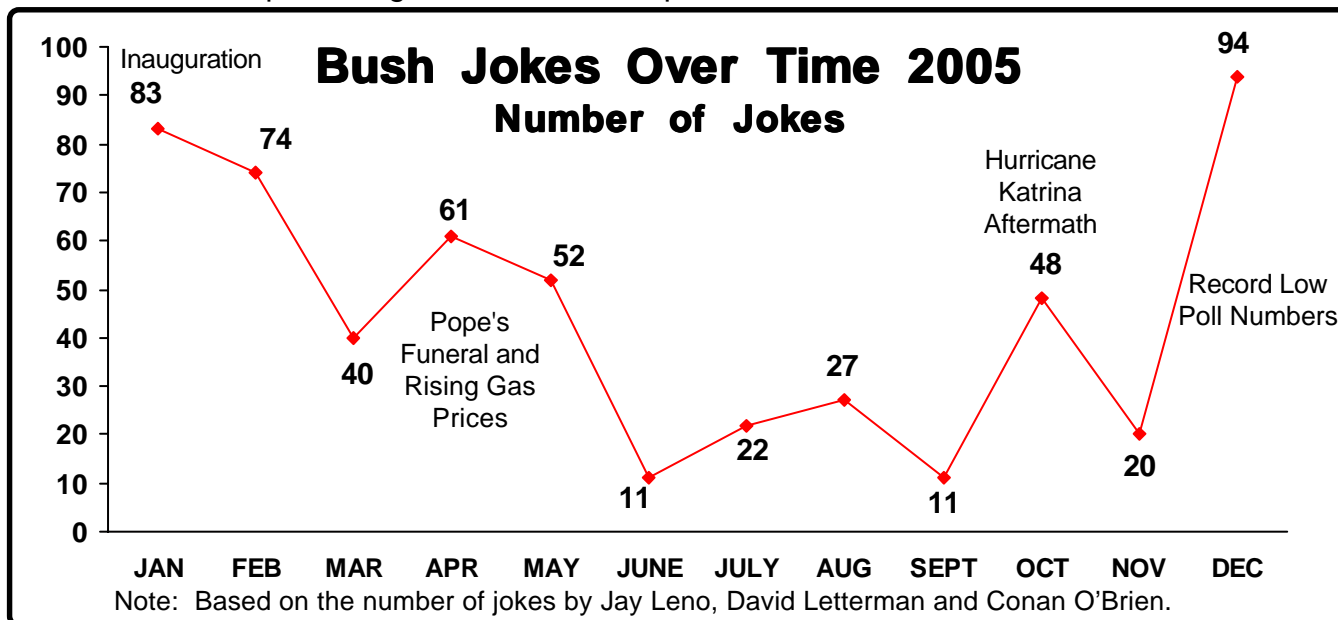
***Ire Over Iraq** Iraq attracts 4 times as many jokes as any other policy debate. *Page 6*

***Partisan Punchlines** Bush is attracting more jokes than President Clinton did. *Page 4*

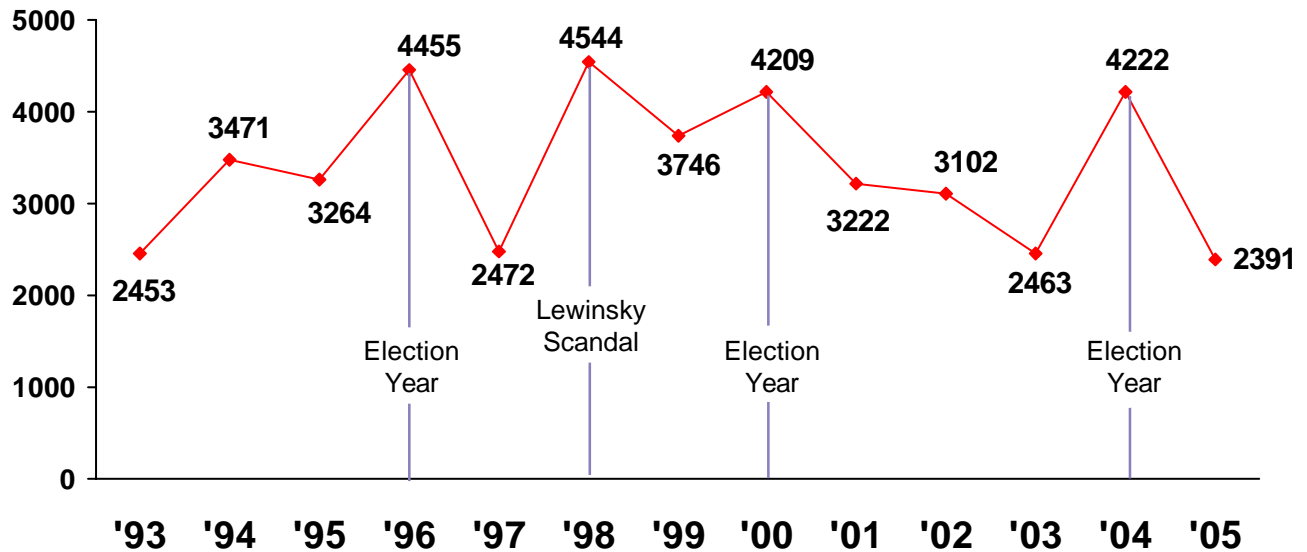


Nearly one quarter (23%) of all jokes about public figures in 2005 were directed toward George W. Bush. Michael Jackson's legal trouble and eccentricities placed him solidly in second place. Bill Clinton started and ended the year with partnerships with the president's father to help the victims of the Tsunami in Asia and Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf coast, which provided the comics with enough material to place him in third place.

President Bush's second inauguration and his delivery of the State of the Union Address kept him in the punchlines early in 2005. Jokes totals spiked again as gas prices rose, and the president traveled to Rome for the Pope's funeral. His highest monthly total in the year came in December, as his poll ratings continued to drop.



Total Number of Late-Night Jokes

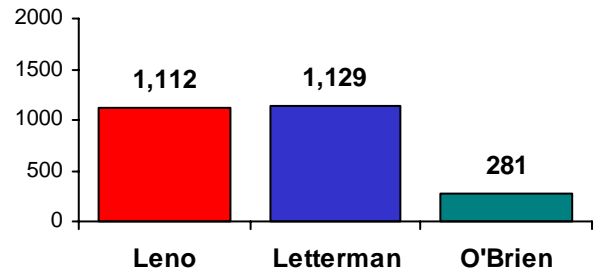
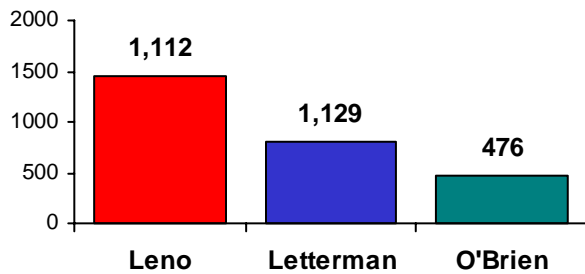


Note: Based on the number of jokes by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien directed toward public figures.

The Bush Years 2001-2005

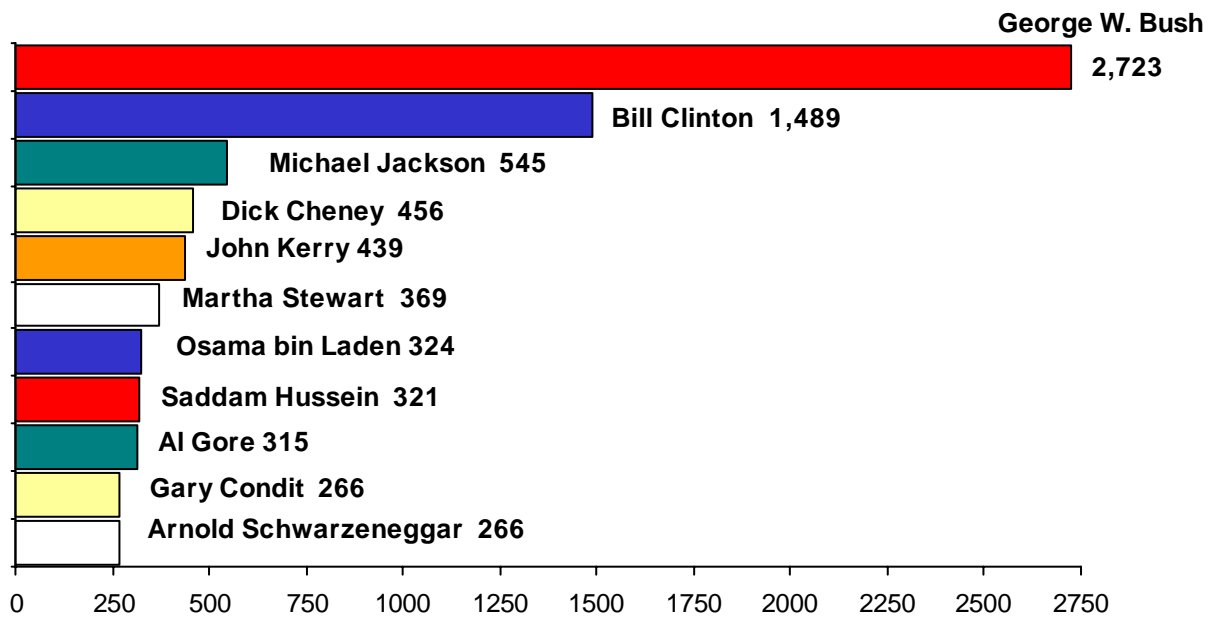
The Clinton Years 1993-1997

Number of Jokes



Note: Based on the number of jokes by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien.

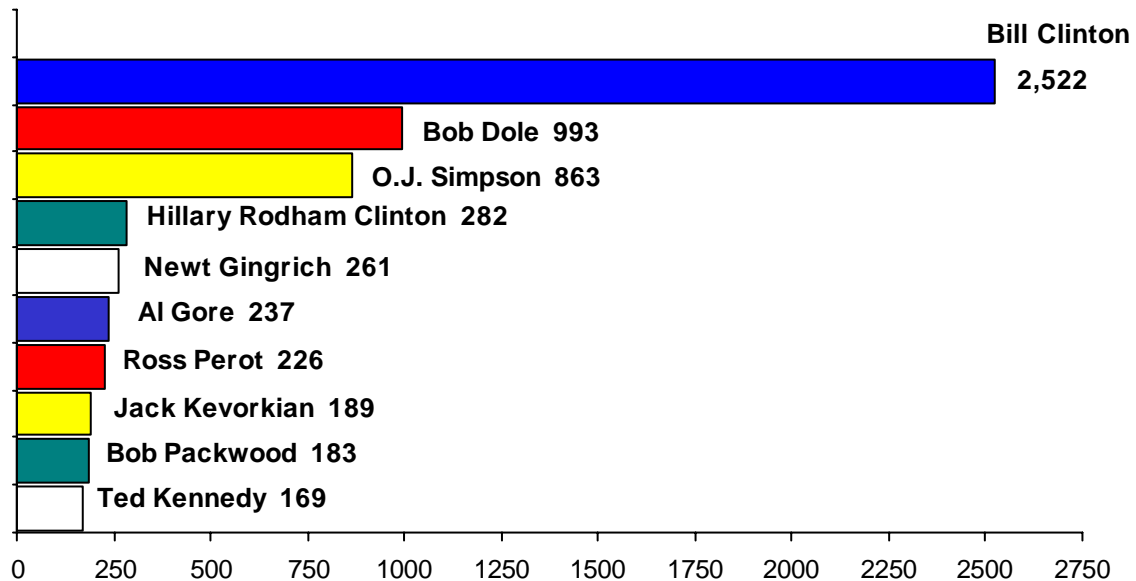
The Bush Years -- Number of Jokes 2001-2005



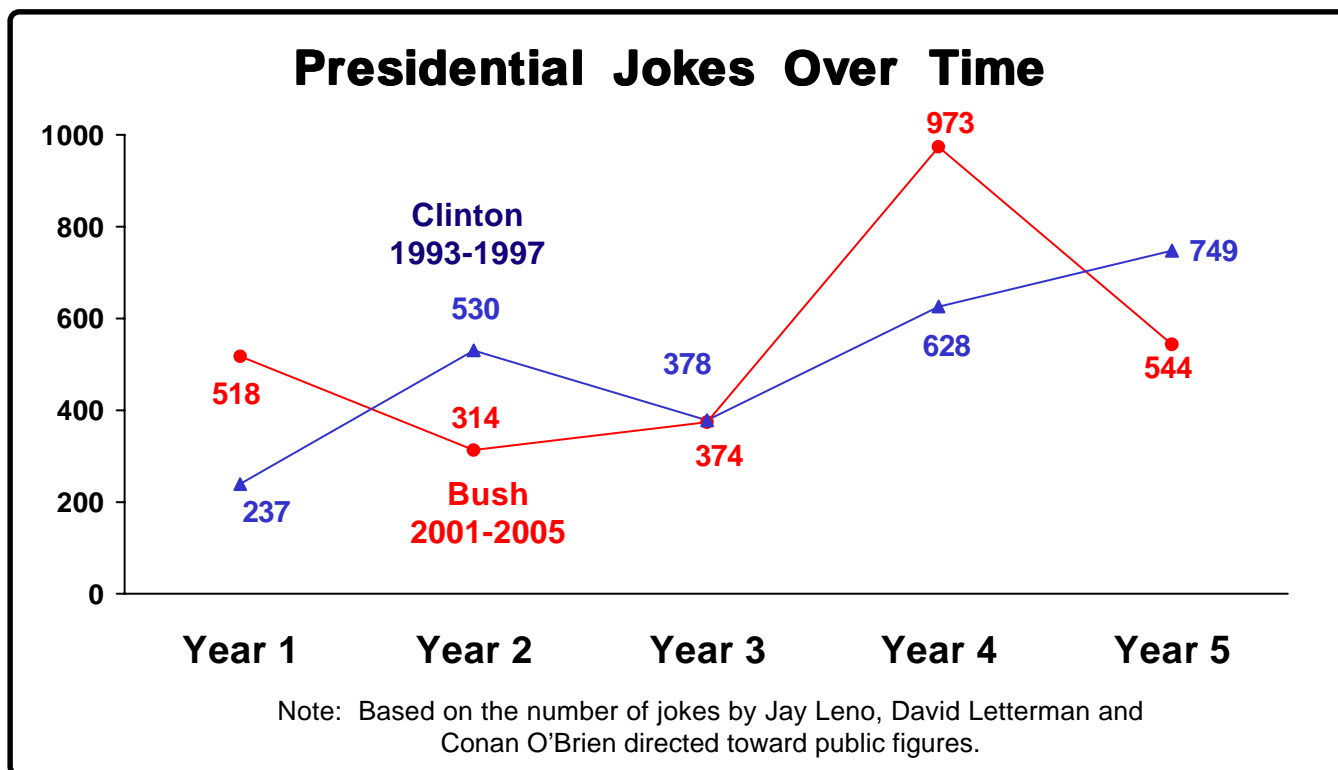
Note: Based on 15,400 jokes by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien.

George W. Bush was the target of 18% of the 15,400 jokes we logged during the first five years of his presidency. During Bill Clinton's first five years in office, he was the target of 16% of the 16,115 jokes about public figures.

First Five Clinton Years -- Jokes 1993-1997

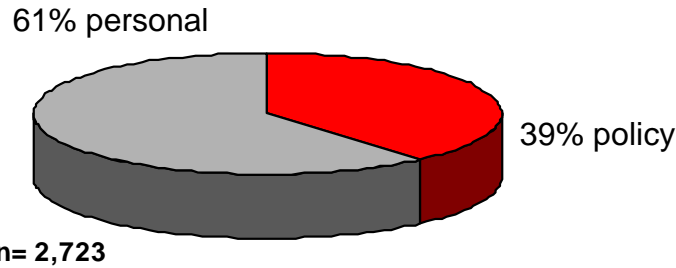


Note: Based on 16,115 jokes by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien.

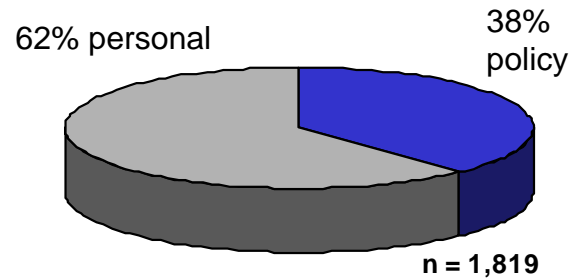


The joke counts for George W. Bush and Bill Clinton have followed different trajectories during the first five years of their respective presidencies. Bush attracted more than twice as many jokes as Clinton during his first year in office, but Clinton was targeted more often in the second year, and they received about equal numbers of jokes in the third. As both ran for reelection in the final year of their first term, Bush pulled ahead again. In fact Republican nominee Bob Dole was the butt of more jokes than the incumbent in 1996. Clinton narrowed the gap in the first year of their second terms, leaving Bush with a narrow lead overall. But Bush will be hard-pressed to retain that lead -- the second year of Bill Clinton's second term (1998) began with the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Bush Joke Topics 2001-2005



Clinton Joke Topics 1995-1997*



Top Ten Bush Joke Topics 2001-2005

1.	Knowledge, Intellect	1,124
2.	Personal Demeanor	259
3.	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>123</i>
4.	Long Vacations	83
5.	Drinking	77
6.	Honesty	56
7.	<i>Economy</i>	<i>43</i>
8.	<i>Gay Rights</i>	<i>42</i>
9.	<i>Terrorism</i>	<i>38</i>
10.	<i>Energy Prices</i>	<i>31</i>

Top Ten Clinton Joke Topics 1995-1997

1.	Sex Scandals	531
2.	Eating	241
3.	Personal Demeanor	126
4.	Whitewater	87
5.	<i>Pop Culture</i>	<i>44</i>
6.	<i>Health Care</i>	<i>28</i>
7.	Drug Use	22
8.	Honesty	22
9.	<i>Policy Flip-flops</i>	<i>19</i>
10.	<i>War on Drugs</i>	<i>9</i>

*CMPA began noting joke topics in 1995

Note: Based on the topics around which each joke is framed in the monologues by Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien.

Jokes about both Presidents Bush and Clinton targeted their personal failings and foibles just over 60 percent of the time, while less than 40 percent were aimed at their policies. Bush jokes concentrated heavily on his alleged lack of knowledge and/or intellectual acumen; this single category accounted for over 40 percent of all punchlines. Clinton jokes were more varied, although almost 30 percent of all punchlines focused on his sexual behavior, and another 13 percent concerned his eating habits.

Examples of Late Night Political Humor

President Bush admitted that much of the intelligence we went to war with was faulty. And you can't blame him for relying on faulty intelligence. I mean, it got him through college. *Jay Leno, 12/15/05*

Historians say the most commonly used phrase during inaugural addresses is, 'My fellow citizens.' However, the most common phrase during President Bush's speech is expected to be, 'My fellow United Statesers. *Conan O'Brien, 1/19/05*

According to Newsweek magazine, President Bush is now living in a bubble. And Dick Cheney, of course, is living in an undisclosed bubble. *David Letterman, 12/14/05*

According to the latest poll, if the election were held today, the Supreme Court would re-elect Bush 7-2. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

At the debate, Bush appeared confident, he appeared relaxed, he appeared calm. That's right, he's drinking again. *David Letterman, 9/30/04*

The anesthesiologist said they had a little problem using the gas on Bill Clinton. They couldn't get him to inhale. Luckily, John Kerry called, spoke to him for ten minutes, he was out like a light. *Jay Leno, 9/06/04*

Saddam Hussein turned in his big report on weapons. It's 12,000 pages long. Still, I understand it's an easier read than Al Gore's new book. That shows you how clever this Saddam Hussein character is. By the time Bush finishes reading this thing, he'll be out of office. *Jay Leno, 12/09/02*

Today O.J. broke the NBA record for all-time court appearances. *David Letterman, 11/20/96*

A new survey shows that the majority of people polled, now consider Bob Dole a nice guy. This poll was a random sampling of crotchety old geezers. *Conan O'Brien, 5/13/95*

Today Newt Gingrich attacked Santa Claus as just another liberal with a give-away program. *Jay Leno, 11/30/94*

Top 10 Highlights of Clinton's Health Care Plan #5) All medical bills are sent to Ross Perot... *David Letterman, 9/17/93*

Note: Joke texts may be altered slightly for brevity.



Media Monitor

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