

A Seat at the Table

I see England, I see France, I see the first lady's underpants."

"Shut up," hissed Megan. "I wish I had never pointed it out."

She was giggling so hard her wine squirted out of her nose, and anyway it was true. Laura Bush, the congenial Texan wife of George, the forty-third and arguably least popular president in the history of the United States of America, had just entered the room, her affable spouse by her side. They were graciously acknowledging the fawning Washington toadies who milled around them, smiling and shaking hands and kissing cheeks. Mrs. Bush was wearing an elegant silky frock, but when she stood with the light behind her you could see her undies. Big, comfortable knickers, what are known in enlightened circles as *passion killers*, in what looked like a floral pattern. Ideal for a long night of smiling and nodding and being a good sport at the annual press, showbiz, and politics bunfight that is the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner.

I was there in my capacity as vulgar lounge entertainer. Megan, my date, was there because she loves me and was proving it again. I had been asked to be the guest speaker by the chair of the entertainment committee. I wasn't their first choice, but after Steve

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Carell and Ellen DeGeneres turned the gig down I think I became a little more appealing. I might be a C-lister, but I was obtainable, willing, and cheap.

I understand why Ellen and Steve said no, since this is, without doubt, one of the most intimidating and difficult jobs available to a comedian. And there were other reasons why I too should have politely declined. First of all there was the event's recent history. Two years before, Stephen Colbert had performed there and, depending on who you talk to, had either died the worst death ever seen by a comic in the history of comedy and death, or had delivered the most fearless piece of political satire this country has ever seen.

The year after, in an attempt to avoid any repetition of the controversy the WHCA had hired the antediluvian Canadian impressionist Rich Little, who most recently achieved fame in the 1970s with his Richard Nixon impersonation, to be the after-dinner speaker. Little had definitely bombed (no debate needed) in a buttock-clenchingly awkward manner; his material was too archaic and meek for the bloodthirsty crowd.

I also should have said no because it's the granddaddy of all corporate events, a large dinner in a hotel ballroom where everyone who is there secretly hates and wishes misfortune on everyone else. This is not an atmosphere in which comedy usually flourishes, although having lived in Hollywood for fifteen years, I'm used to it.

I should have said no because the sound system in the hotel was so awful it was impossible for anyone in the first two rows of tables to understand what was being said, Scottish accent or not.

But I didn't say no. I didn't say no because between safety and adventure I choose adventure. Plus, I thought it would be great crack, getting to meet all these muckety-mucks, and, truthfully, as a new American I felt it would somehow be unpatriotic to refuse a chance to make a fool of myself in front of the president, who, after all, had no problem doing exactly that in front of the entire world.

It certainly was an impressive and eclectic guest list, with

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Salman Rushdie, Condoleezza Rice, and Christiane Amanpour sharing warm chicken cutlets with Pamela Anderson and the Jonas Brothers as they sat around the big circular tables. It was such an unlikely collection of people that it actually felt like a dream. So much so, that more than once I checked to see if I was wearing pants, something I often do, just in case. With a past like mine it's never a bad idea.

Before the meal there had been a little reception backstage for the people who would be seated on the dais, and their partners, although the only spouses at the head table would be the comfortably arsed Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Cheney, wife to Dirty Dick.

It was a chance for everyone to meet and have a chat before we would go out on the stage and sit in a line like that last supper painting.

Anne Compton, the WHCA committee chairman, took charge and whisked Megan and me around the room, introducing us to the other honored guests. We met the diminutive and sassy White House press secretary, Dana Perino, who revealed to me that she was married to a Scotsman and I said that would explain why she was crazy. She laughed. I think she thought I was kidding.

We met Richard Wolfe, the clear-thinking MSNBC political commentator and henchman of the mighty Olbermann, who in a brief conversation assured me that Barack Obama would be the next president of the United States. This still amazes me, because at that point Obama didn't even have the Democratic nomination.

We met José Andrés, the celebrity chef, who seemed to me as if he'd been hanging around the open bar too long and was banging on in a thick Spanish accent about the wonderful world of tapas. We met a few more broadcasters and White House types whose names now escape me, and then all of a sudden we were standing in front of Mr. and Mrs. Cheney and being introduced. I felt a

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little awkward; I'm always a bit shy around evil people, so Megan took the lead. She has a knack for dealing with difficult men and is very knowledgeable about fine art, having worked for a time as an art dealer in New York. She and Mrs. C struck up a conversation about Picasso—the Cheney's were the proud owners of a few of his sketches.

"Where do you hang them?" asked Megan.

"Oh, we don't," replied Mrs. C. "They're nudes, and we have grandchildren. We don't want them to see them when they come over."

"But they're Picassos," protested Megan.

"But they're nudes," smiled Mrs. Cheney dangerously.

I put a hand on Megan's elbow. I didn't want trouble. You don't want to be on the Cheney shit list.

Dick himself was surprisingly affable and had a croaky easy laugh, but I did get the very strong impression that I was in the presence of a Bond villain. All he needed was a pussy to stroke, although not in front of the grandchildren of course.

We made small talk for a while before the Cheney's moved on to the next glad-handers. Once they were gone, I told Megan that Dick Cheney had been ogling her breasts.

"Nah," she said. "I thought that for a second, then I realized he was just appraising my diamonds."

The Secret Service guys started to clear the room. Megan wished me luck with the speech and kissed me goodbye. I stood alone at the bar, and that's when I first saw the president of the United States. He was, unbelievably, standing on his own in the corner, looking a little awkward. He saw me at the same time and recognized me. He smiled that big goofy smile of his and walked over, a moment in my life so surreal that it's matched only by the time I was pursued by what I imagined to be killer ducks during a bad acid trip.

“Hi, Craig. How you doin’?” said the leader of the free world, offering a friendly hand.

For months before the event I had fantasized about what I would say to the president if I did have a private conversation with him. Would I take him to task for everything he had done that I so profoundly disagreed with, berate him for his foreign policy, his strategy in the Middle East, his disregard of the Kyoto Protocol and the Geneva Conventions? Would I forcefully harangue him to change his mind on education and the economy and the war on drugs and then remind him of the constitutional imperative to separate church and state? In the end I concluded that it would be a teensy bit arrogant to lecture the president of the United States on the constitution of his own country. And after all, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t already been assailed by some very clever politicians and journalists, many of whom were much smarter and more informed than an uncomfortable vaudevillian in an ill-fitting tuxedo. However, I was unable to resist the opportunity to voice my dissent, and, throwing caution to the wind, I charged him with a biting . . .

“Hello, sir, nice to meet you.”

I mean, what the hell else do you say to the president of the United States of America when you’ve only been a citizen of the nation for two months? Even if you don’t agree with the man and his policies, he’s still the fucking president.

He disarmed and surprised me because he wasn’t what I expected. I’d watched way too much MSNBC and was prepared to meet a drooling moron.

Mr. Bush was open, friendly, and refreshingly candid about what he thought of most of the ass-kissing that had been going on for the last twenty minutes. He told me that this was one of the more enjoyable events in his year because it was so informal and he got to be funny. He was interested to know what my speech was going to be like; I think he was slightly nervous about what I would

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say because he had to sit there and grin and take it no matter what, with no advance warning—the White House didn't get a transcript of my remarks, because this is America, and free speech, and all that.

I told him I planned on ribbing the press as much as the politicians, and he seemed relieved.

After all, he was already a lame-duck president seen as an election liability by his own party and whose approval rating was lower than many thought possible. Attacking him too hard would be like joining a fight after it was over and claiming victory.

I decided to treat the whole thing like the famous incident from World War I when, on Christmas Day of 1917, German and British troops took the day off from killing each other and played soccer in no-man's-land.

I had talked with former WHCA dinner speakers Jay Leno and Drew Carey about what they had done when they had been there and they both gave similar advice. Read the room, don't be too blue but don't be too tame, make sure you smack everybody at least once, and remember it's not really about you, you're just the help.

So that's what I did. When my turn came to speak I first mocked the C-SPAN network for their archaic single-camera coverage of the event, then teased the president and his minions and the assembled journalists in a way I hoped they'd find amusing rather than flat-out insulting, although I did call the *New York Times* "sanctimonious whining jerks" for declining to attend because they felt it devalued journalism to be too cozy with the administration.

I talked a little bit about why I became an American, and I managed not to cuss, and when I was done they gave me a standing ovation, so I can only conclude that my strategy worked.

I don't think I was particularly sparkling that night, I think the crowd was just relieved, as I was myself, that the whole thing was behind us and nothing too embarrassing had happened.

It was a whirlwind after that. Parties and celebrities and back-

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slapping and schmoozing. I felt like I had had an anvil removed from the top of my head.

Megan and I got to our room about three a.m. and had to get up at six to catch our flight back to L.A.

That I became a citizen of this country in January and was at a dinner with the president in March is, I think, in a small way, indicative that we are still the country we hope we are. I had wanted to be an American citizen for a long time; I have felt I was an American since I was thirteen years old and first visited here. Life got in the way, or, more accurately, I got in my own way. I was sidetracked and waylaid by my own demons, but America is the land of the second, third, and 106th chance.

As I dozed on the farty rattly airplane on the way home, I thought about my short conversation with the president.

We had been talking about Scotland; he had visited for a while when he was younger and expressed a sort of puzzled awe at the amount of drinking that was done there, hinting that he had taken part in a fairly major way. We talked a little bit about the dangers of booze. I've been sober for seventeen years and, according to rumor, he himself a little longer than that.

"It's a long way from where I've been to standing here talking to the president," I told him.

"It's a long way from where I could've ended up to *being* the president," he replied.

"Only in America," he chuckled.

We clinked our glasses of sparkling water.

"Damn straight, Mr. President," I said.

And I believe it.