

# High Time To Call Foul When Entertainers Cross The Line

**BYLINE:** DAVID HORSEY, Seattle Post-Intelligencer

**SECTION:** EDITORIAL, Pg. A13

**DATE:** May 8, 1996

In a year of political pie fights between congressional Republicans and White House Democrats, it took the rude comments of comedian Al Franken to send Newt Gingrich into the consoling arms of Tipper Gore.

It happened at the conclusion of the White House Correspondents Dinner at the Washington Hilton Saturday night. The annual gala is a cozy menage a trois among the establishment media, national politicians and Hollywood luminaries in which allegedly serious news organizations vie with one another to see who can snag the most celebrities to fill the seats at their dinner tables.

Kevin Costner, Tom Selleck, Anthony Hopkins and numerous lesser names from the entertainment industry bumped up against Bill and Hillary Clinton, Steve Forbes, Pat Robertson and about 2,800 other politicians, reporters, publishers and the occasional cartoonist, such as Garry Trudeau and Herblock.

Many of those present were curious to see if the night's featured entertainer, Franken - "Saturday Night Live" gag writer and author of the best-selling "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot" - would veer into insult humor the way New York radio shock jock Don Imus did at the broadcast journalists soiree in March. Imus had offended the president and first lady and embarrassed the first couple's hosts with his rude jokes about Clinton's past marital infidelities. What, we all wondered, would Franken do?

After 2,800 hunks of salmon had been consumed, and after the president and vice president had been drafted to hand out awards to various White House reporters like a couple of city councilmen at a Kiwanis Club meeting, and after the president performed his own monologue of very funny material, Franken launched into his own routine with a swipe at Imus. He said he was working on a new book that would be titled "Don Imus is a Big Putz."

Franken, well-known as a liberal Democrat, made plenty of fun at the expense of Republicans and made a humorous point of fawning over the president (Franken said his goal for the evening was to please Clinton and to be appointed American consul general to Bermuda), but it was good, sharp political humor that entertained even such archconservatives as G. Gordon Liddy.

Well into his 40-minute performance, he struck a mock-serious tone, saying he wanted history to record that the era of rudeness and incivility in political

discourse had ended at the correspondents dinner . . . would end, that is, just after he told a few jokes about House Speaker Gingrich.

If Franken's subsequent gags had been funnier, it might have helped, but tittering and moans skittered through the ballroom as the comedian dug an Imus-size hole for himself. Among a string of overly personal jabs, the joke that gave most offense was the following:

"You remember that Newt said, and I quote, 'If combat means living in a ditch, females have biological problems staying in that ditch for 30 days because they'd get infections.' Now I read this and the image that immediately came to mind is of Newt about 15 years ago explaining to his 13-year-old daughter that she had just gotten her first infection."

Oops. It was a pretty lame joke based on a pretty obtuse musing from Newt's lexicon of oddball opinions. What was surprising was that, even in this heyday of insult and bathroom humor, the sophisticated dinner audience still retained enough propriety to get real squeamish about a lampoon of the Gingrich daughter's first menstruation.

Conservative ethics guru Bill Bennett walked out on Franken, as did Palms Springs U.S. Rep. Sonny Bono and Republican campaign impresario Mary Matalin with her Cajun liberal husband, James Carville, in tow.

Showing the good breeding he received in the private schools of Washington, Vice President Al Gore came down from the head table to personally apologize to Gingrich, saying, "That was mean." Gore's wife, Tipper, gave the speaker a hug and kept her arm around his waist to demonstrate her emotional support, despite the fact Gingrich has spent two years trying to destroy the political agenda of her husband.

Gore said he wished he had walked out on Franken once the jokes went sour. Gingrich suggested they should all consider turning down invitations to these media megameals if the price of admission is always to risk personal attack and embarrassment.

As soon as the Gores left, Franken popped up. Like every entertainer in the world, he just wants to be liked and congratulated on his performance. He looked genuinely shocked when Gingrich treated him like a bad boy in the principal's office. Gingrich coldly made his point: "Al, don't touch the children."

The lips of Franken's exceedingly broad mouth quivered as he tried the unfortunate tack of defending his own humor by noting the nasty things Rush Limbaugh says about liberals. His mama should have told him, "Don't do something just because that awful Limbaugh boy does it."

Franken's gags were neither so mean nor the reaction to them so intense that the incident will produce a watershed moment that will bring down the curtain on American incivility. A nation that glorifies actors and athletes famed for their brutal aggressiveness and trash talk and tolerates rudeness and cruelty in classrooms, playing fields and freeway interchanges has plenty of lessons still to learn regarding respect and good manners.

By comparison, Al Franken is a sweet altar boy.

But, just maybe, the people who give big media dinners should rethink their role as hosts. Should the president of the United States or the speaker of the House, whatever one thinks of their politics, be expected to sit quietly while some big-mouth entertainer insults them and members of their families?

As a paid practitioner of rude political satire, I believe every satirical format from political cartoons to talk radio to late-night comedy should be given free rein to tackle politicians and political issues without a referee calling fouls. However, I also concede there is a functional difference between guerrilla theater and a dinner party. Even with political humor, there are times to show a little respect.

The rule is simple: It's not polite to invite someone to dinner and then spit in their face.