



# Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict

*Paul Lewis*

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## **Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict** Paul Lewis

What do Jon Stewart, Freddy Krueger, Patch Adams, and George W. Bush have in common? As Paul Lewis shows in *Cracking Up*, they are all among the ranks of joke tellers who aim to do much more than simply amuse. Exploring topics that range from the sadistic mockery of Abu Ghraib prison guards to New Age platitudes about the healing power of laughter, from jokes used to ridicule the possibility of global climate change to the heartwarming performances of hospital clowns, Lewis demonstrates that over the past thirty years American humor has become increasingly purposeful and embattled.

Navigating this contentious world of controversial, manipulative, and disturbing laughter, *Cracking Up* argues that the good news about American humor in our time—that it is delightful, relaxing, and distracting—is also the bad news. In a culture that both enjoys and quarrels about jokes, humor expresses our most nurturing and hurtful impulses, informs and misinforms us, and exposes as well as covers up the shortcomings of our leaders. Wondering what's so funny about a culture determined to laugh at problems it prefers not to face, Lewis reveals connections between such seemingly unrelated jokers as Norman Cousins, Hannibal Lecter, Rush Limbaugh, Garry Trudeau, Jay Leno, Ronald Reagan, Beavis and Butt-Head, and Bill Clinton. The result is a surprising, alarming, and at times hilarious argument that will appeal to anyone interested in the ways humor is changing our cultural and political landscapes.

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