

## Culture



Political comedy

### Who gets the last laugh?

NEW YORK

**Greg Gutfeld of Fox News rules the airwaves from a perch that the left made for him**

RECENTLY GREG GUTFELD, who hosts America's most popular late-night show, on Fox News, became a father for the first time at the age of 60. Like all comics, he mined his experience for material. During his first show back, he took aim at his favourite targets, including liberals ("It amazes me more that some moms can be so pro-abortion...because these moms know that having kids is the best thing they're ever going to do. Aside from ironing") and transgender people ("Any man who thinks putting on a dress and a wig makes you a woman: no way! I was there when that baby popped out, and no dude can do that. You might as well put on a diaper and claim you're a baby").

This formula—jokes guaranteed to offend politically correct lefties, delivered with a knowing smile to camera—has made Mr Gutfeld America's most-watched

late-night television host. Last year around 2.5m people tuned into his show each night, on average; the runner-up, Stephen Colbert on CBS, claimed 23% fewer viewers. Declaring him "the king of late night" (as he has called himself in the title of one of his 11 books) does not come without caveats: "Gutfeld!" airs at 10pm, when more people are awake, while other networks' comedy shows air later, between 11.30pm

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and 1am. He is also the only right-wing host in a left-leaning field, so liberal viewers split among several shows; Mr Gutfeld has the conservative audience to himself.

But his success embodies a dramatic shift: today right-leaning comedians sit atop American political culture. The country's most popular podcaster, Joe Rogan, is a stand-up comic and owns a comedy club in Austin; like Mr Gutfeld, he is a libertarian who supports Donald Trump and mocks liberal piety. In the run-up to the election, Mr Trump declined an invitation from "60 Minutes", a network-news stalwart, but appeared on several conservative podcasts, including Mr Rogan's, as well as Mr Gutfeld's show. Tom Shillue, a writer and guest on "Gutfeld!", says that he and like-minded comedians "are selling out clubs that we've never sold out before".

Conservative comedians are not new—in the early 2000s the Blue Collar Comedy Tour featured conservative white Southern men—but they were niche. Soon after Mr Trump's first inauguration in 2017, Tim Allen, a sitcom star, hyperbolically likened being conservative in the entertainment world to living in Germany in the 1930s, because it forced conformity. *Nicht mehr.*

Mr Gutfeld is small and elfin, with arched eyebrows and the slightly leering ▶▶

grin of someone who has just got away with something. Asked to name the people who made him laugh when he was young, he says, "That's easy," and lists a dozen examples, including Monty Python (a British comedy troupe) and comics Jonathan Winters and Steven Wright, whose influences are all apparent in his work. Before joining Fox in 2007, he worked for magazines, including *Men's Health* and *Maxim*. Now he also co-hosts "The Five", a panel discussion that is Fox News's highest-rated show.

To a first-time viewer, the popularity of "Gutfeld!" might seem as jarring as some of the jokes. The studio and set are small and simple. Unlike other late-night programmes, there is no house band. Stars do not come on to flog their new films. Instead, after a monologue—which Mr Gutfeld delivers seated, often dressed in an open-collar shirt rather than a suit and tie—he and panellists riff on the news and intersperse pre-recorded skits that are sometimes filmed on iPhones.

Though it skewers targets on the left, the show is not a doctrinaire endorsement of Republicanism. Mr Gutfeld says he finds politics "disgusting" and "fake" and calls himself "a libertarian who questions his libertarianism" and just wants to create "an absurd universe" on his show.

In the same way that Mr Trump's bluster attracts those who find mainstream politicians phoney, the unpolished aesthetic and taunting banter of Mr Gutfeld's show has a part-of-the-club appeal. From other late-night hosts, Mr Gutfeld argues, "You get the sense that they think they're better than you are...They're wealthier, they're smarter, they have better-looking friends and bigger homes...On my show, you're basically hanging out with your buddies...Viewers feel like they know us."

They also feel catered to, after years of being overlooked. Joe DeVito, a comedian and guest on "Gutfeld!", says that "People come up to me to tell me how...they're so grateful that someone in the media is listening to them, and not telling them they're racist idiots all the time."

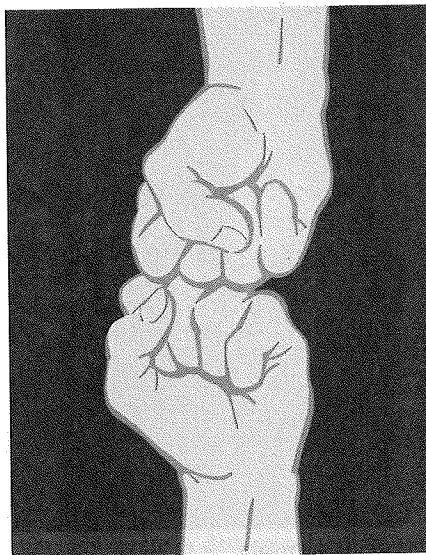
There is a widely held view that comedy has an inherent left-wing bias, and in their book "Late Night in Washington", three academics, Stephen Farnsworth, S. Robert Lichter and Farah Latif, found that it did—at least after dark on TV. In the first third of 2021, late-night hosts (Mr Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel and Trevor Noah) told nearly four times as many jokes about Mr Trump as Joe Biden, despite the latter being president. Of the 20 most popular political joke targets, the only Democrats other than Mr Biden were Andrew Cuomo, who resigned as New York's governor following allegations of sexual harassment, and Joe Manchin, a conservative Democrat from West Virginia.

As for left-wing comedic bias more gen-

erally, Nick Marx, an academic who co-wrote "That's Not Funny", a book about right-wing comedy, argues that it does not exist. "Comedy is an empty vessel, used by any ideology to create in- and out-groups: a group that gets a joke and another group targeted by it," he says. Some may think that Mr Gutfeld and his ilk are punching down by joking about women and trans people. But fans of his would argue that he is, in fact, punching up against cultural elites. In this view, the true target of a joke about trans or homeless people is not just the ones joked about, but scolds who try to set rules for permissible humour.

Lefties may grumble into their organic oat-milk matcha lattes about Mr Gutfeld's popularity, but they bear some responsibility for his rise, and not just because of their censoriousness. The animating spirit of satire, after all, is not left- or right-wing politics, but anti-institutionalism: the desire to throw rocks at the establishment and stick it to the man. And in the Trumpist era, Democrats have become reflexive defenders of cultural and political institutions. Whatever the merits of their support for, say, the independence of the Justice Department's law-enforcement efforts, it is bad for comedy. Mocking rule-enforcers is funnier and more fun than conformity.

Will the show have to change when Mr Trump reassumes office on January 20th, and Republicans are no longer the underdogs? That night "Gutfeld!" will ring in the new era with a live show from Washington, DC. Asked whether Republican ascendancy may make his job harder, Mr Gutfeld claims he is not concerned: "There will be enough clowns [and] enough weirdness that I foresee no end in sight in terms of content...and when whatever side in media or entertainment refuses to go after certain sacred cows, I'll be there to throw that cow right on the grill." Viewers are likely to stay hungry for whatever he serves up. ■



## The Economist Reads

# Presidential biographies

Want to spend time with a different American president?

WHATEVER YOU think of Donald Trump, his inauguration on January 20th is the capstone of the greatest ever comeback in American politics. Whether you seek succour in history or are ready to escape the news cycle, books can help. All 45 presidents have been the subject of at least two biographies, but these are five of the best.

### The Bridge.

By David Remnick.

Inconveniently for biographers, Barack Obama is a gifted writer—second among presidents, perhaps, to Ulysses Grant. He told his own story in "Dreams from My Father" (1995). Still, "The Bridge", by the *New Yorker's* editor, chronicles Mr Obama's rise. Most entertaining is his account of Chicago's South Side, where Mr Obama began his electoral career. This is not a comprehensive account of Mr Obama's legacy—it ends shortly after his first term began—but it is a colourful portrait of a man who met his country's moment.

### John Adams.

By David McCullough.

Americans' reverence for the Founding Fathers can obscure their flaws. David McCullough's John Adams is brave yet filled with self-doubt, exacting yet fussy. (He and Benjamin Franklin, forced to share a room while travelling, argue over whether the window should be open or closed at night.) The magic of this book is that this ordinary, pudgy man is waging an epic battle for his country's independence. Often overlooked, Adams, Mr McCullough argues, was central to America's birth: he pushed relentlessly for independence, served dutifully as vice-president and negotiated shrewdly with European powers.

### Reagan.

By Max Boot.

Ronald Reagan was a paradox: an affable communicator who won voters' and staffers' affection, but who was emotionally distant from everyone except his wife. That remoteness has frustrated biographers: Edmund Morris, who won a Pulitzer prize for his book on Theodore Roosevelt, found Reagan "inscrutable" despite years of conversations; he ended up writing a semi-fictionalised "memoir" of Reagan instead. Max Boot, a historian