

With Gore, Letterman Talks Politics, Humor

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"I've never been this excited in my entire life. Honestly. I mean that," said Late Show host David Letterman yesterday as he walked toward the Columbia Journalism School to speak to former Vice President Al Gore's class on national affairs in the information age.

Like the weather, the atmosphere in yesterday's class was warmer than two weeks ago, when Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan was the guest. Joined by Late Show writers Gerard Mulligan and Bill Scheft, Letterman spoke to the class about the intermingling of humor and politics.

"This was another very productive, profound class," said architecture student Benjamin Bolger. "He covered a lot of serious issues."

Gore's approach to those issues, however, did not seem so serious. "Everybody was laughing the entire time," said Gore, who added that the "spontaneous jokes [Letterman's writers] were telling the whole time" were the highlight.

Upon leaving the building, Gore sounded off on current events for the first time since his December concession speech. Asked by Newsweek reporter Howard Fineman to comment on the situation of the Navy airplane and pilots currently in the possession of the Chinese government, Gore said, "My prayers are with the personnel there and with their families and I think we are right to insist upon return and I hope that they will be returned very soon."

During the class, political apathy was a main topic of discussion, with Letterman saying that he hopes his jokes do not make viewers disinterested in government. "Letterman weighed in thinking that in general he tries to get people involved in political activities, and that humor is a way of trying to get people into the fray," Bolger said.

Discussion centered not only on the impact of political humor on the public, but also on politicians themselves. "There was some comment about President Ford [and] what cost him the election," Bolger said. "[Whether it was] pardoning Nixon

over Watergate or the impression comedians created that he stumbled too much."

That led to a discussion of the popular Saturday Night Live sketches that lampooned candidates' performances in last year's Presidential debates. Gore acknowledged that the portrayals of him did have an impact on his campaign, according to Bolger.

Letterman told the Journalism School, School of International and Public Affairs, and the handful of Columbia College students that he enjoys having guests who are able to talk about serious topics. "He said a lot of actresses like to talk more about makeup than real hard-hitting facts. So when he has a chance to get someone like Tom Brokaw on the show or Al Gore, he really looks forward to that," Bolger said.

As the approximately 40 students in the class walked through the lobby of the Journalism School on their way to the door, some were approached by Columbia Senior Public Affairs Officer James Devitt, who told them that a reporter from People magazine was waiting outside and hoping to interview them about the course.

Teaching his fifth of eight classes this year, Gore appeared strongly in control. "Gore said he'd give a brief introduction," said Bolger. "Around 20 to 25 minutes into his set up, Letterman interrupted and said that he wasn't sure whether he should [have] agree[d] to do this or not because Gore is known to be a content-oriented person, but then his writers assured him that all he really needed to do was appear, and that Gore would speak most of the time."

"So Letterman looked at his watch and said 'we're doing really good,'" Bolger added.

As to Letterman's personal political leanings, Bolger said, "He mentioned that he voted his conscience and voted across the board."

Before walking out the door of the School of Journalism to allow the dozen or so members of the media assembled in front of the building to take pictures of the two of them together, Gore proudly boasted to Letterman of a joke he made when Greenspan spoke to the class.

In that class, Gore pre-empted Greenspan's answer to one question, according to a student quoted by Dow Jones. The question had to do with whether one could predict the turnaround speed of a recession-bound economy, and Gore gave the answer: if plotted on a fever chart, a recovery "could be a U, or it could be an L, like a hockey stick, or a V and, if the wrong choices are made, it could be a W." Gore told Letterman that "[I said,] 'It could be a W,' wait two beats, and everybody starts laughing."

Letterman burst out into genuine laughter, and the pair discussed the courses Gore is teaching in Tennessee as they walked toward the door.

Since Letterman needed to return to his midtown studio to tape his show, he did not stop to speak to the reporters gathered outside the building.

When asked on the way to his car whether the class had lived up to his expectations, the comedian said, "We had a lovely time. I've never been this happy in my life."

Queried for details as to why he had so enjoyed the past hour and a half, Letterman said, "Well we had snacks. We had punch."

Claiming that he is "surprised to be invited anywhere," Letterman minimized his role in the political system, saying, "I'm just telling jokes."