

## THE PRESIDENT'S STATUE AND THE PROMISED LAND

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Nothing is too sacred for oral tradition. In American folklore which is largely jokelore, much of the material has to do with sex, religion and politics. Students of American civilization unfamiliar with the ways of oral tradition may not be aware of the value of recording such folkloristic materials. Assiduous collection of political folklore, for example, may demonstrate that there is a store of floating anecdotes and parodies which have been used with a variety of political figures. As an illustration of this type of folkloristic material, some presidential anecdotes will be considered briefly.

In 1961, some typical items were collected in Bloomington, Indiana. According to a new executive order from Washington, the Statue of Liberty would henceforth be known as "Our Lady in the Harbor." In an economic reference to the same figure, it was stated that there was a plan afoot to remake the Statue of Liberty. Instead of holding the torch, she would be holding the bag. The religious references included the dividing of Massachusetts into High Mass and Low Mass; building a large number of bird cages in Washington to house all the cardinals; and replacing "In God We Trust" on the nickel with "In the Pope We Hope." Other jokes took initials as a point of departure. G. O. P. would no longer mean Grand Old Party, but "Genuflect or Perish."<sup>1</sup> J. F. K. according to the folk was an abbreviation for "Jobs For Kinfolk."

While many of the above items appear to have been composed in honor of President Kennedy, it is possible that some are revitalizations of similar tributes to Al Smith. In any case, there are some political jokes which consist of floating apocryphal stories. Many of these stories have been attached to some of the great names in American politics. Americans, like other peoples, love to poke fun at authoritarian figures. Such figures include religious, military and political leaders. A story which circulated during the Kennedy/Nixon presidential contest went as follows: Mrs. Nixon was talking to Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Nixon boasted, "You know, Jackie, last night I slept with the future president of the United States." Mrs. Kennedy replied, "That Jack will do anything for votes." This story was also told with the roles reversed; interestingly enough, nearly the same story referring to a local election in Illinois was related by Abraham Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> The folk have a vast repertoire of anecdotes which may be used whenever an appropriate situation

arises. Two days after the beginning of the disgraceful University of Mississippi integration crisis, the following joking question was heard in Lawrence, Kansas. "Did you hear that Governor Barnett was divorcing his wife? He caught her watching colored television." Exactly the same joke was told about Governor Faubus in the Little Rock integration crisis of several years ago. In order to document the nature of floating parodies of political figures in American folklore, the traditional stories of the proposed president's statue and the promised land will be cited.

The following item was collected in Bloomington, Indiana, in February, 1962:<sup>3</sup>

Dear Friend:

We have the distinguished honor of being members of the committee to raise fifty million dollars to be used for placing a statue of John F. Kennedy in the Hall of Fame, Washington, D.C.

This committee was in quite a quandary about selecting the proper location for the statue. It was thought not wise to place it beside that of George Washington, who never told a lie, nor beside that of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who never told the truth, since John F. Kennedy can never tell the difference.

After careful consideration, we think it should be placed beside the statue of Christopher Columbus, the greatest New Dealer of them all, in that he started out not knowing where he was going, and in arriving, did not know where he was, and in returning, did not know where he had been, and managed to do it all on borrowed money.

The inscription on the statue will read:

"I pledge allegiance to John F.  
Kennedy and to the national debt  
for which he stands, one man, ex-  
pendable, with graft and corruption  
for all."

Five thousand years ago, Moses said to the children of Israel, "Pick up your shovel, mount your camels and asses, and I will lead you to the Promised Land." Nearly five thousand years later Roosevelt said, "Lay down your shovels, light up a Camel, sit on your ass; this is the Promised Land." Now Kennedy is attempting to steal your shovel, raise the price of Camels, kick your ass, and tell you there ain't no Promised Land.

If you are one of those few with money left after paying taxes, we will expect a generous

contribution from you for this very worthwhile project.

Sincerely,  
The Committee

The above item is actually a combination of at least two separate jokes: the President's statue and the promised land. These stories occur independently. A version of the promised land collected in Bloomington in 1961 ended with Eisenhower:

King Saul said unto his people 15,000 years ago, "Get off your ass, pick up your shovel, get on your camel and I'll lead you to the promised land." Then in 1944, Roosevelt said, "Throw away your shovel, sit on your ass, light up a Camel; this is the promised land." Then in 1959, Ike takes your shovel, sells your camel, kicks your ass, and says there is no promised land.

A version of the President's statue story collected in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1948, ends with Roosevelt:<sup>4</sup>

A committee of admirers of the late president was trying to decide where to place a statue of Roosevelt in the Capitol Building. They decided it would not do to place his next to Washington who never told a lie. They also decided it would not do to place it next to Lincoln, because Lincoln was known as "Honest Abe." The committee was very undecided, but after careful consideration they decided to place the statue next to that of Columbus, because he did not know where in hell he was going, did not know where the hell he was when he got there and did not know where the hell he had been when he got back. And he did all this on borrowed money.

No doubt these anecdotes existed long before 1948. On the other hand, it is possible that some of the elements may be of more recent vintage. Neither of the earlier versions cited above included the parody of the pledge of allegiance. In any event, there is clearly a pattern of political parody in American folklore and it is one that is likely to continue. The folk need only change a few names and places. After a few such localizations, the parody is ready to be employed once more. Politicians should not be offended by these parodies; only important and usually revered figures are parodied by these traditional means. It is the mark of a free society when the people may laugh openly at their leaders.

## Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of the current academic adage: Publish or Perish. The latter philosophy even exists in the form of a sick joke. Two centurions are at the foot of the cross. One says, "He sure was a great teacher," to which the other replies, "Yeah, it's too bad he didn't publish" (or "Yeah, but what did he publish?").

<sup>2</sup> It was Richard M. Dorson who recently pointed out Lincoln's use of this anecdote. Dorson also collected a localized version of the anecdote in Michigan in 1946. See his "Oral Style of American Folk Narrators," in Style in Language, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York, 1960), 47. The nonpartisan character of folklore is also demonstrated by the wind-up mechanical doll jokes. While there is the Eisenhower doll--you wind it up and it stands still for eight years, there is also a Kennedy doll--you wind it up and it tries to pass a welfare bill. In this connection, it is interesting that the mixture of religion and politics is found in stories about Nixon as well as Kennedy. An anecdote ridiculing Nixon's repeated references to his humble origins and suggesting that false modesty might conceal exalted visions of grandeur is as follows: A reporter asked Nixon, "Is it true, Mr. Nixon, that you were born in a log cabin?" "No," said Mr. Nixon, "you must have me confused with Abraham Lincoln. I was born in a manger."

<sup>3</sup> A very similar text was published in the Bloomington Herald-Telephone (Friday, June 22, 1962), 8, as a letter to the editor.

<sup>4</sup> This story was collected by John C. Locker of Bangor, Michigan, from Robert Jennings of East Lansing. Both Locker and Jennings were students at Michigan State. I found the item in the Presidential Anecdote folklore of the Indiana University Folklore Archive located in Bloomington, Indiana.