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DICK GREGORY

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DICK GREGORY

The leaders of the Black movement in the United States generally seem to be skilled rhetoricians. Martin Luther King was a master of the eloquent, grand style, Stokely Carmichael is a brilliant speaker and his adaptability is legend, H. Rap Brown stands firm in his forcefulness and through his speeches helped to give rise to the Black militants, and Julian Bond promises to become one of the main leaders of the Black revolution, thanks to his steel-trap mind and effective use of argumentation. These leaders seem to emulate the same characteristics in the use of rhetoric as did the statesmen who engineered the American Revolution.

One notable exception seems to be a young Black named Dick Gregory. He seems to have found a means of persuasion that is far removed from his colleagues. His weapon is wit, and combined with dedication and honesty it helps make his rhetoric one of the most persuasive and unusual of the Black spokesmen.

Black humorists have generally been people like Stepin Fetchit and Eddie "Rochester" Harris, who played slow, ignorant Blacks. The white public accepted this because they fit into the molds that they had so carefully stereo-typed for them. The Black comics that used any social thought at all in his act was condemned to the "grits and gravy" circuit of Black nightclubs. Talent like Nipsy Russell and Red Foxx were robbed of their success and their effectiveness sterilized.

Dick Gregory refused to fit into this niche and through his efforts Black comedians like Bill Cosby and Flip Wilson have reached the top in show business. However, the story of Dick Gregory only begins in the world of entertainment. This paper deals with the evolution of Gregory from comedian to Black leader. To fully understand Gregory and his dedicated use of humor, we must understand the decisions that he made and how his life influenced his attitudes toward persuasion.

The oral presentation that preceded covered the role of comedy in the United States, however a brief summary will help show the importance of Gregory.

Americans have tended to accept only light comedy. They also like their politics simple. So, "I like Ike" and "I love Lucy" have become American standards. The emergence of such modern comedians as Lenny Bruce, Tom Smothers, Mort Sahl, and Dick Gregory frightened most Americans. These comedians began to place the comedy effect on the same level with political comments. They poked fun at America, but also began to call for social and political change. They used comedy to tie together their arguments; humor had become a catalyst for the new comedians.

The American people have been wary of this type of humor and forced most of the leaders into some sort of oblivion. It is not with surprise that we find the John Birch Society listing Tom and Dick Smothers, Mort Sahl, and David Steinberg as American Communists. The form and concepts of the new comedy are seen as a dangerous affront to those built

into the core of our establishment, and they are simply not being tolerated.' As George Wallace, former Governor of Alabama said about Dick Gregory, "I don't think that he's funny. Not any more." 1

Dick Gregory was born in the heart of the ghetto in St. Louis. He was raised with the same pressures and frustrations that helped to kindle the militant leaders like Rap Brown and Eldridge Cleaver. Yet, Gregory emerged a soft-spoken gentle man opposed to violence in any form. His sense of humor was a God-given gift, but the influence of his mother sharpened his wit and showed him how humor could be used to get along in a cold and unfriendly society.

You have to smile twenty-four hours a day, Momma would say. If you walk through life showing the aggravation you've gone through, people will feel sorry for you, and they'll never respect you. She taught us that man has two ways out in life - laughing or crying. There's more hope in laughing. 2

Gregory put his theory of laughing quickly into everyday practice trying to exist in the rough neighborhood in which he was raised. It was here that he formed his first theory of humor. He used it as a defensive weapon to hide the fact that he was a poor, Negro boy with no father. He decided that humor was more effective than fighting.

Once you get a man to laugh with you, it's hard for him to laugh at you. The kids began to expect to hear funny things from me, and after a while I could say anything that I wanted. I got a reputation as a funny man. And then I started to turn the jokes on them. 3

Dick Gregory is one of the fastest humans alive and his track records in college still stand. It was through his prowess in sports that he escaped the poverty of his ghetto environment. He was also a bright student and like so many

other Blacks that had the benefit of higher education, he began to see the inequalities of our society and he began to examine himself more closely.

All you can do is sit in the team bus with your metal suitcase across your knees and bang on it like it was a drum and sing calypso songs and tell jokes. Happy-go-lucky Greg. Personality Kid. Funny man. Always laughing. Sure. Momma always said there was more hope in laughing. 4

The confused state of mind was to haunt Gregory for some time, and it drove him to question the system that let his mother die with an empty stomach.

After graduation, Dick Gregory was offered a career in sports, but he turned it down. He had decided that he would go to New York and become an entertainer. He seemed to feel that comedy offered him a chance to help and change a system, rather than to be a token in professional sports and help perpetuate it.

Dick Gregory approached his new career with only two theories of humor. The first was that it could be used as a defensive weapon when people attack you for being poor and Black. The second was that it could be an offensive weapon that was so biting it could rip the mask off of the truth showing the hypocrisy of the system. In New York, Gregory turned to the fundamentals of humor like no comedian before him.

Morning, noon, and night, twenty-four hours a day, trying to develop a mind like I once developed a body, watching, listening, talking. Hours and hours of television . . . What makes people laugh, what are people thinking about? 5

Gregory completed his studies after a year and began to try for work in some small nightclubs. He played strip-joints and honky-tonks for two years, often as only an emcee, but he always studied the audiences. When he felt sure of an audience he would make observations on the racial scene. The story of his routine began to get around. Many club owners began to refuse to hire him, but Hugh Hefner headlined him in the Chicago Playboy Club and Dick Gregory became the hottest comedian in the nation.

Gregory entered a white man's world with his original act. Even though he was often daring in his subject matter, he was still a comedian of the "old-school" of comedy. Yet, as his success grew, he gave birth to an idea; an idea that comedy might be able to make the white man think. The idea that his comedy material might have the potential force to begin to change the system kept at him, and as he soared in popularity he began to change again. This time his act changed with him;

I've got to hit them fast, before they can think, just the way I hit those kids back in St. Louis who picked on me because I was raggedy and had no Daddy. I've got to go up there as an individual first, a Negro second. I've got to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man. I've got to make jokes about myself, before I can make jokes about them and their society - that way they can't hate me. Comedy is friendly relations.

"Just my luck, bought a suit with two pair of pants today . . . burnt a hole in the jacket."

That's making fun of yourself.

"They asked me to buy a lifetime membership in the NACCP, but I told them I'd pay a week at a time. Hell of a thing to buy a lifetime membership, wake up one morning and find the country's been integrated."

That makes fun of the whole situation.

Now they're listening to you, and you can blow a cloud of smoke at the audience and say:

"Wouldn't it be a hell of a thing if all this was burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nothing?"

Now you've got them. No bitterness, no Uncle Tomming. We're all aware of what's going on here, aren't we, baby? Now you can settle down and talk about anything you want. 6

Dick Gregory continued in this manner for five years.

He played the biggest nightclubs and appeared on the top television shows. Then, Medgar Evers asked him to come to Mississippi for a march for freedom. He had to make another decision in his career, a decision that brought him closer to his role as a leader of the Black revolution.

It would ruin me as a comic. Nobody's going to come to laugh at an entertainer who goes marching and demonstrating and getting himself arrested. 7

For the next two years, Gregory played between two worlds. Slowly but surely, he began to see himself as a prostitute to the world of entertainment. He jumped when the man snapped his fingers and he had become a puppet in the hands of the white public who paid his bill. This, coupled with the assassination of Medgar Evers, was enough to make one of the highest-paid comedians in the world give up his career and become a leader in the civil-rights movement in America.

Dick Gregory had given up a successful career as a comedian to become a speaker for civil-rights, and as once he had worried that no one would laugh with him, he was now worried that no one would listen to him. So, just as a few years before he had studied comedians, he now began to study speakers.

The effective speaker that is not a student of rhetoric can often be a reality and find success in his career. Aeschines was an actor but carefully mastered the rules of rhetoric, not through schooling, but through speaking. Abraham Lincoln was never schooled in the art of rhetoric but somehow managed to carry on. John Kennedy was bored with rhetoric and did poorly in those classes at school. What all of these men had was an idea of effective speaking. Aeschines constructed his speeches like well-written plays in which he was to deliver a moving soliloquy. Lincoln and Kennedy were effective because of their personalities and thorough investigations of every side of every issue. Dick Gregory had been surprised to find the humor had such a small role in persuasion and that very few speakers joked with their audiences. He had his tool of comedy firmly in his grasp and decided to forge his rhetoric around his own individual skills.

Gregory had to begin with Black audiences. He was called upon to ignite the tired, frightened, Negro of the deep South. He had to make them angry enough with a racist society to march for freedom, yet he wanted them to make the decision for themselves. He had to be different than the other speakers they had heard - and ignored. So, he began to use humor again;

Every white man in America knows we are Americans, knows we are Negroes, and some know us by our names. So when he calls us a nigger, he's calling us something we are not, something that exists only in his mind. So if nigger exists only in his mind, who's the nigger? 8

The audience laughed. They laughed like the white audiences that Gregory had played to for five years. Then, they stopped laughing and they began to applaud. They marched the

next day in Selma, Alabama, in the biggest demonstration for civil-rights that had taken place in the United States.

Gregory made his audiences aware of the bigotry of the white society and the inequality in the system that had branded them all niggers.¹ Yet, he did this by bringing smiles to their faces and hope to their hearts, rather than frowns and the sense of futility they had grown to accept over the long years that had gone before. Gregory began to find that a humorous approach to the issues put the Black audiences at ease and made them feel like human beings.² He had discovered the universal appeal that his humor had and was beginning to see just how powerful a weapon it could really be as a speaker.³

As he rallied the Blacks, Gregory continued his study of humor.⁴ He was dissatisfied with his speaking tours and felt that he still wasn't communicating his ideas as effectively as he could through the use of humor. He looked back into his theory of humor and tried to analyze what made it work and how it could be improved to help facilitate persuasion and the expression of his views.

As he worked with his theory of humor, he discovered that comedy could often summarize entire arguments and show them in greater perspective than could a thousand examples.⁵ He knew that people enjoyed hearing jokes and tended to memorize them and tell them to friends. So, he began to use humorous conclusions to sum up his arguments. He could sum up all his arguments about the frustrations of the Blacks in getting people to listen to them in a single one-liner;⁶

Senator Goldwater said that if he were a Negro he'd be patient - but if Senator Goldwater were a Negro, nobody would give a damn what he said. 9

Dick Gregory became more socially aware as he toured and his interests were broadening into a larger range of concern. This new concern made Gregory once again examine his theory of humor as a persuasive aid. He discovered that he was always being quoted in some magazine or newspaper. It seemed that his material was being heard everywhere in every medium possible.

His first record, "Dick Gregory In Living Black and White," was on the best-seller charts for more than a half a year. It seemed you couldn't pick up a newspaper without noting the latest Dick Gregory quip. Many of these have become classics, referred to in editorials and media far beyond the normal scope . . . 10

Gregory began to realize that his humor was being remembered long after his statements of policy had been forgotten. He began to see that by careful use of humor, he could become even more effective than he had ever been and would be heard by more people, even if second-hand. So, after three careers, Dick Gregory had completed his basic theories of humor as a tool for persuasion;

- I. Humor can be used as an effective defensive weapon to thwart your opponents.
- II. Humor can also be an offensive weapon that can attack people and arguments.
- III. Humor can summarize arguments and make points clear.
- IV. Humor is easily remembered and quoted assuring it of usually a longer life than a somber address.

There have been more dynamic theories of humor and psychologists have run extensive studies as to why people laugh.

but Gregory and his theory is so important because it worked so well for him and helped to create of the most dynamic of the Black orators. His theory is also important when we remember the climate of humor that it emerged from. Gregory and his theory of humor are far removed from the pie-in-the-face humor that Americans have loved and cherished down through the years.

It would probably be appropriate at this point to show a sample speech by Gregory and point out his theory in action, however this is rather hard to do in the case of Gregory. Dick Gregory never writes a complete speech. He comes prepared with only his general topic with the main points underlined. There is no humor in it. When he arrives, he judges his audience and determines how he is going to present his subject.

If he senses that the audience is hostile, he will use his defensive humor and gradually turn the audience towards the idea of listening to him. He uses his standard comments;

To me there's no difference in the North and the South. Down South they don't care how close I get as long as long as I don't get too big; and up North they don't care how big I get as long as I don't get too close. 11

If he finds an apathetic audience, he uses offensive attacks of humor to fire them up;

Kids lead a tough life. Nobody takes them seriously. Nobody listens to them. They're always getting pushed aside. Kids and my people have a lot in common. Only our problems aren't solved by getting older. If man could only get a little older a little later, and a little wiser a little younger. 12

He often uses this line at colleges, where is being asked to speak more and more. In the course of an evening, Gregory may often use both styles, but usually one is dominant.

Gregory has become aware of the power he has in his comedy and has realized that it will usually be remembered long after his serious statements. For example, he recently became concerned over the slaughter of the young in Viet-nam. His speeches have a detailed seven-point attack on the United States involvement which he says is probably ignored or quickly forgotten by most of his audience. They are used to attacks of this sort and it becomes increasingly harder to make them listen. So, Dick Gregory sums his arguments up with a humorous quip that is being quoted widely;

Some white folks I just can't understand. They're more concerned about busing a kid to school than they are about shipping a kid to Vietnam . . . that's like worrying about dandruff when you've got cancer of the eyeballs. 13

This is how Dick Gregory uses his theories of humor to help persuade his audiences. He has formed a unique rhetoric and also has given comedy a needed transfusion in our society. In an era where so many Black speakers sound so much alike, Gregory is a breath of fresh air and his humor keeps him as important and topical as today's newspaper.

There is one other important factor that we must consider when we look at Gregory as a speaker. He appears to be one of the most honest men in public life. He has always been true to his conscience whether it meant fasting over United States involvement in Viet-nam or criticizing Rap Brown for being immature in his statements on civil-rights. "Playboy" magazine recently named him one of the few honest men of the de-

cade. The "Los Angeles Times" call Gregory, " . . . a man of such integrity and persuasiveness that the (audience) cannot help but be moved . . ." 14

An honest man and a humorous man almost seem to contradict each other, but Dick Gregory is both and much more. He is a unique and dynamic speaker, he is a noted author of five major books, and he is a funny, funny man. Critic Peter de Lissovoy bests sums up Dick Gregory, the man and the speaker, and why he is such a successful speaker in an area where there is so much confusion and mistrust;

"Gregory is an instructive, sometimes great, humorist because he finds ways of expressing his and his audience's humanity at a comic level really common to both." 15

FOOTNOTE PAGE

- 1 Gregory, Dick. Write Me In. p. Introduction.
- 2 Gregory, Dick. Nigger! p. 25.
- 3 Ibid. p. 41.
- 4 Ibid. p. 81.
- 5 Ibid. p. 106.
- 6 Ibid. p. 132.
- 7 Ibid. p. 162.
- 8 Ibid. p. 201.
- 9 Morgan, Tom. Holiday. p. 126.
- 10 Hefner, Hugh. From the Back of the Bus. P. 16. (Foreword)
- 11 Gregory, Dick. From the Back of the Bus. p. 64.
- 12 Ibid. p. 52.
- 13 Idea. Write Me In. p. 29.
- 14 Gregory, Dick. The Shadow That Scares Me. p. Introduction.
- 15 de Lissovoy, Peter. Nation. p. 84.

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