

jon stewart

BY JEFF SHARLET

Are you optimistic about the future?

Am I optimistic? Absolutely! This country is a big boat. It takes a lot to knock this ship completely off a course. Can a small group of people do enormous amounts of damage? Sure. But this is an incredibly resilient place. We have survived so much worse than this. It's one of the most frustrating things when Republicans say something on the floor of Congress like, "If it weren't for us, you'd be under Sharia law." Or "If the Democrats had that kind of attitude in World War II, we'd all be speaking German." No, I don't think we would, because (a) we're not that great at languages, and (b) we have a shitload of guns. You think Iraq is a difficult place for an occupying power to govern? Try this place. It wouldn't just be Red Dawn, with Patrick Swayze leading a couple of knuckleheads with a rocket launcher. This is an unconquerable country.

When Keith Ellison was elected the first Muslim congressman, one Republican said, "I fear that one day this country will be run by Muslims." Yes, we elect one Muslim every 230 years. At this rate, by the year 3400, we will be an entirely Muslim country.

What'll that be like?

The people who run this world love to tell you, "There are evil people in the world! Hobbes was right! We're savages!" The truth of it is, that's not the case. The majority of the world is not savage. Yeah, you put us in a certain situation of depravity and everyone will revert to some sort of Lord of the Flies format. But for the most part, it's an incredibly civil society.

Germany in 1932 was an incredibly civil society.

I'm not saying that we're not an economic disaster away from being demagogues. Or that the line between acts of madness and acts of goodness isn't tenuous. But people's general tendency is to not want trouble. If you were to give Iraq a choice right now between the freedom to assemble and the ability to shop without shrapnel going through your skull, my guess is they'd give up freedom of assembly. Freedom is overrated. I'm a law-and-order guy. I'm not anti-authority. There's a big difference between not trusting institutions blindly and just being against authority. Some people believe that we're going after conservatives on our show just because they're conservatives. That's idiotic. We go after what we think is absurd.

But can't absurd be dangerous?

There's a lot of talk now that we are becoming a fascist state. But what Bush has basically done is reinstitute everything we used to do to people in the Fifties and Sixties. I mean, it's not even the worst of what we used to do. It seems like as civilization moves forward, the pitches and swings moderate. If you look back through the history of our country, the pitches and swings used to be much more volatile. You know, we went through a depression! Right into a world war. And then into the Sixties.

So you don't imagine another revolutionary decade in your lifetime?

They're all revolutionary. It's only through nostalgia that every decade is better in hindsight than it was. People feel like the world's gotten out of control. The world has never been more in control. One thing that is troubling, I think, is that technology has advanced to the point where very powerful things can be in the hands of very small groups of people.

You mean weapons? Or propaganda?

Weapons, propaganda, everything. That's the yin and yang. Look at Myanmar right now. The technological revolution there is threatening a very undemocratic regime. On the other hand, that very same technology can organize people who wish to do damage. Both sides can use that. I'm not saying extremes couldn't come back. You

could get another Black Plague. Who the hell knows? Then there's globalization: Does the progress of certain countries, as they say, raise the tide for all others? Or do we get taken down a peg by that prosperity being spread around?

Is globalization the key issue of the future?

The defining issue is the power of the individual. For good and for bad. The individual is more empowered in this day and age than ever in the history of the world. You're more connected, it's easier to generate ideas and movements, and it's easier to create havoc. The funny thing about the Internet is it's not even revolutionary. The phone was revolutionary. The Internet is just the consolidation of everything we know how to do in one box, so that now everyone's aware of everyone else.

Is this what you imagined the future would be like when you were younger?

I used to feel that when the government declared war on something – war on poverty, war on drugs, war on scurvy – it was over. Drugs didn't have a chance, man! We fucking declared war on 'em. "Man the ramparts, boys, we're going to war against drugs!" I had a sense that whatever it was that we turned our focus to, that automatically fell before our power.

Are there visions of the future now that seem persuasive to you?

I've learned to stop believing in books about the future. Turns out nobody knows.

And yet you have all these guests on the show who think they do.

The great thing about videotape is that you have the same people saying something ten years ago that's completely different than what they're saying now. What you learn is that we're not that accountable to our past, we're not that accountable to our

predictions. People could have felt this same way right before the Dark Ages hit. "Man, we got this civilization thing figured out! Everything's rocking. We're moving toward algebra and all kinds of other shit. This is really working out for us – oh, who took a shit in the water? Now we're all gonna die!"

How do you think the decade of 9/11 will be remembered fifty years from now?

Christ, who cares? If I can remember anything fifty years from now, I'll be a happy boy. It will be remembered like most decades: by wiseguy comics on VH1.

History is statistics – everybody manipulates and cherry-picks references from the past to bolster their own thing. The best example is Vietnam. For the president – who has avoided any Vietnam comparison – suddenly now Iraq is like Vietnam. But in a good way! You know, "We should never have left there. And because we left, that's why the Khmer Rouge massacred so many people." Which says nothing about the bombings that destabilized Cambodia, says nothing about whether we should have been there in the first place, says nothing about anything other than "the thing that I don't want to do – that's the thing they did before that fucked everything up. So that's what I've plucked out of history."

I have to ask this question –

"What's on my iPod?"

Exactly. Your influences.

Kurt Vonnegut and Aldous Huxley were probably the two authors I read the most and thought the most about when I was younger. I was always interested in people who described societies. Not anthropologically, but satirically or futuristically.

Were there songs that shaped your work?

Only in the idea of leaving New Jersey and moving to New York City. "Baba O'Riley" and "Thunder Road" – things like that that spoke to "I'm getting the fuck outta here – whatever we gotta do." That feeling of movement.

I read that one of your childhood heroes was Eugene Debs, the five-time Socialist Party candidate for president in the early twentieth century.

Yeah, baby! Actually, more Norman Thomas.

Six-time Socialist candidate for president, after Debs, and a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union. Are there still characters like that around?

Ralph Nader is a character like that. Back in those days, a guy like Norman Thomas was viewed as a corroding member of society. But if you look at almost every aspect of the New Deal, that's where it came from. It just had to come through a process of mainstreaming before it could be accepted.

Conservative ideas have been mainstreamed during the past thirty years.

You know, the wonderful thing today about conservatives and government is they seem awfully interested in running this thing they despise. The president is very fond of saying, "I don't trust the government to keep money. It's your money." As a matter of fact, isn't it all our money? Not just the one tax rebate. Pretty much the whole fucking thing's ours, isn't it?

Conservatives have this idea that you can trust government to protect national interests overseas militarily, but not to pass out cheese. It's this idea that corporations function well, but governments can't. But they're made up of the same atomic material, are they not? Isn't government us?

Why is TV news so bad?

It's a failure to recognize that news is a different animal – that there's a place for something that

is a public service. The news should have slightly different rules. Roger Ailes [president of Fox News] has shown that you can exercise editorial management over the process. I may not necessarily agree with the way Fox is exercising it, but it shows that it can be done. News should function as our digestive system.

That sounds disgusting.

It is disgusting. What I'm saying is that they should take in the fruit and entrees that are presented by politicians and the corporations that process it, and come up with turds of wisdom, if you will. You either bring clarity or you bring noise. The media should be filters, and they can only be that if they exercise editorial judgment.

It infuriates me when people say, "That's elitism." No, it's not. That's expertise. That's like saying to doctors who diagnose people, "You're being elitist, telling me I have heart disease. I don't want to hear that. I want to eat cake and ice cream."

How have changes in media and technology affected your own work?

Comedy was much shtickier in the Forties and Fifties. Then Robert Klein, Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor came along, and they did comedy about social conditions. They didn't change the world, but they changed the way comedy was done. All we've been doing is adding colors.

But isn't political satire subversive?

In some respects it keeps the stasis.

You don't think it's dangerous?

No. I believe it is subversive in societies that are closed – where it takes real balls to do it. None of us is a Soviet dissident in a gulag for writing a beautiful poem that is an allegory for Soviet repression. With HBO now, I don't think that anybody could possibly say anything that people haven't heard. It's very difficult to shock anybody anymore. I'm not even sure what the subversive edge is.

Ann Coulter suffered repercussions from calling John Edwards a faggot.

As a businessperson, she has made a choice: "Even if I narrow my audience to true believers, there's enough money there. I have to keep pushing it until it's just me and one other crazy person with a lot of money." Maybe she'll be hired by a crazy billionaire, just her and him, and he'll go, "Say something about lesbians! Heh-heh. 9/11 widows! Gimme another!"

So you don't think her brand of extremism represents the future of politics?

What you generally get from politicians is "Vote for me or we shall all perish!" In a puff of smoke, or rising waters. You know, nineteen guys with box cutters brought down the Twin Towers. Are we supposed to go to war until there's not nineteen guys that want to do damage to us? One day, two assholes throw pumpkins off an overpass. And now when you drive down the highway and go past an overpass, you see those giant ten-foot chain-link fences. Two vandals out of millions of people can fuck up your way of life in ways you can't even imagine. There's no way to fool-proof the world. You cannot out-engineer crazy.

Didn't you say you were an optimist?

The reason I don't worry about society is, nineteen people knocked down two buildings and killed thousands. Hundreds of people ran into those buildings to save them. I'll take those odds every fucking day.