

# Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

## Bye George! I Think He Had It!

*"If you have selfish, ignorant citizens, you're going to get selfish, ignorant leaders... So, maybe, maybe, maybe, it's not the politicians who suck. Maybe something else sucks around here... like, the public. Yeah, the public sucks." – George Carlin (1937-2008)*

I've been accused by some – mostly in the *Journal's* online forum – of being too cynical and negative, and have been labeled a nihilist, obstructionist, and "doom & gloomer." I prefer to see my comments as those of a skeptical realist whose innate idealism and optimism has been repeatedly dashed by the disappointing actions and shortcomings of fellow (so-called) *Homo Sapiens*, but who finds some relief, if not solace, in irony, sarcasm, and tweaking conventional beliefs and their proponents.

In that, I believe I stand in good company, from Greek playwright Aristophanes and Roman playwright Plautus, to French playwright Moliere and essayist Voltaire, to American satirical journalists Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and H. L. Mencken, to pioneer stand-up comics Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks.

The latter two social critics died too young (40 and 32, respectively, Bruce of a drug overdose, Hicks of pancreatic cancer), but not without each developing a dark, despairing, fatalistic persona early on that may have been partially the result of poor health, alcohol and drugs, censorship, and grinding legal battles.

Yet, those alone can't explain the passion, the biting sardonic edge, the *need* to rant and shock and make people see "the Truth." Somewhere there must have been an inherent sense that injustice and hypocrisy were rampant, and that the American Dream was a fraud. San Francisco columnist Herb Caen, an early, enthusiastic supporter of Bruce, wrote in 1959: "They call Lenny Bruce a sick comic, and sick he is. Sick of all the pretentious phoniness of a generation that makes his vicious humor meaningful. He is a rebel, but not without a cause, for there are shirts that need un-stuffing, egos that need deflating."

On the tenth anniversary of Hicks's 1994 death, a motion before the British Parliament noted "the passing of one of the few people who may be mentioned as being worthy of inclusion with Lenny Bruce and George Carlin in any list of unflinching and painfully honest political philosophers." Now, alas, George Carlin, at 71, has joined the list of the departed.

Carlin, too, had a history of poor health, having survived several heart attacks and drug dependency, but his misanthropic nihilism seems to have developed over many years of reading, reflection, and resignation... not because he was apathetic, but because he cared too much, and saw the ever-growing forms of "BS" that humanity was swallowing. As Carlin said: "I look at it this way... For centuries now, man has done everything he can to destroy, defile, and interfere with nature: clear-cutting forests, strip-mining mountains, poisoning the atmosphere, over-fishing the oceans, polluting the rivers and lakes, destroying wetlands and aquifers... so when nature strikes back, and smacks him on the head and kicks him in the nuts, I enjoy that. I have absolutely no sympathy for human beings whatsoever. None. And no matter what kind of problem humans are facing, whether it's natural or man-made, I always hope it gets worse... I think we're already 'circling the drain' as a species, and I'd love to see the circles get a little faster and a little shorter."

Carlin began as a disc jockey in the 50s; during the early 60s he was a typical *shlick* comic in short hair, suit and tie, doing characters and bits tame enough to earn

him regular gigs on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Tonight Show*. A turning point was the night he was present at Lenny Bruce's arrest for "obscenity," and, refusing to show ID to the police, was taken to jail in the same vehicle as Bruce. Soon, he began sporting long hair, beard, earrings, "hippie" attire, and he dropped his characters, appearing more and more just as "himself."

Always a student of language and culture, he was a fierce critic of euphemisms and their use for distortion, lying, and reflexive manipulation. His "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television" led to a lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court. His routines were studied in graduate schools. He was especially critical of religion, consumerism, American culture and politics, the celebrity-obsessed media, poor journalism, patriotic flag-waving, and military adventurism. But like Bruce (and the previous "good company"), hatred of hypocrisy, injustice, stupidity, greed, vanity, (and, yes, disappointment in humanity) seemed to be the fuel that fed the passion. As noted in Wikipedia, "He professed a hearty *schadenfreude* in watching the rich spectrum of humanity slowly self-destruct, in his estimation, of its own design; saying, 'When you're born, you get a ticket to the freak show. When you're born in America, you get a front-row seat.'" And this is what he saw there:

"The real owners are the big wealthy business interests that control things and make all the important decisions. Forget the politicians, they're an irrelevancy. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything. They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the statehouses, the city halls. They've got the judges in their back pockets. And they own all the big media companies, so that they control just about all of the news and information you hear. They've got you by the balls. They spend billions of dollars every year lobbying – lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want; they want more for themselves and less for everybody else."

"But I'll tell you what they don't want. They don't want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don't want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They're not interested in that. That doesn't help them. That's against their interests. They don't want people who are smart enough to sit around the kitchen table and figure out how badly they're getting f\*\*ked by a system that threw them overboard 30 f\*\*king years ago. You know what they want? Obedient workers – people who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork but just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly s\*\*ttier jobs with the lower pay, the longer hours, reduced benefits, the end of overtime and the vanishing pension that disappears the minute you go to collect it. And, now, they're coming for your Social Security. They want your f\*\*king retirement money. They want it back, so they can give it to their criminal friends on Wall Street. And you know something? They'll get it. They'll get it all, sooner or later, because they own this f\*\*king place. It's a big club, and you ain't in it. You and I are not in the big club."

Four days before his death, the Kennedy Center announced that Carlin would be the 2008 recipient of the *Mark Twain Prize for American Humor* in November, now becoming the first to be awarded posthumously. Ironically, his best screeds, like the above polemic, weren't even *humorous* any more, but mordant "unflinching and painfully honest" political truths the powers-that-be would rather we didn't hear.

I'd like to think Twain and Carlin are hanging out together somewhere, probably shaking their heads... too sad to laugh, too amused to cry.