

# Laughter in the Ruins

What hasn't changed since 9/11

LAST SUMMER SOMEONE e-mailed me an item from [nastyfinger.com](http://nastyfinger.com), a satire site that sells T-shirts bearing the slogan "pihad: my anti-dog." According to the article, the authorities had finally settled on a plan for rebuilding Lower Manhattan: "vintage television actor Dick Sargent would be hired as a replacement for the World Trade Center."

The site included an "artist's concept of the New York City skyline after Dick Sargent is installed," along with learned references to some lesser-known moments in the resume of the man most famous for taking over the role of Darin in the later years of the proto-Wiccan sitcom *Bewitched*.

Now this is national greatness. We may or may not succeed in fending off future massacres, or in crushing the network of thugs behind the September 11 attacks. But in the face of a separate but related threat, we have proved ourselves more than resilient.

It has been a year since scolds from Roger Rosenblatt to David Brooks exulted that the ironic would now give way to the iconic, the sarcastic to the bombastic, the deadpan to the grave. No one called for humor itself to disappear—not openly, anyway. But certain subjects, we were told, would be forgotten, discarded as so much frivolous nonsense; and the topics that remained would never be discussed without the appropriate gravitas.

Yet irreverence and distraction

have prevailed. Crude jokes and celebrity trivia have survived. It took a while, but mocking the president is popular again. What a relief!

Unlike many writers, I didn't fret much about the future of dissent after 9/11, except in the larger sense that everyone in the country, dissidents included, might, you know, die. Within weeks, the most radical positions short of actual support for Al Qaeda were being not just championed but rewarded. Michael Moore had a best-selling book. Hell—Noam Chomsky had a best-selling book. It wasn't just possible to challenge the consensus; it was profitable. The only prominent casualty has been *Politically Incorrect*, and that was already on its way to a long-deserved death.

But if I didn't worry about our ability to dissent, I did wonder about our ability to be wisecracking slob. There was a time last fall when it seemed inappropriate to broadcast comedy shows on TV, a time when our only outlet for silly topical humor was online doctored photographs of Osama bin Laden. Even *The Onion* was on hiatus. When the late-night comics returned, they did so almost apologetically, obviously unsure just what their role in society would now be.

By February, ABC was publicly pondering giving Ted Koppel's nightly time slot to David Letterman.

In the year since the World Trade Center came down, it's been gratifying to note all the things that *haven't*

changed. I can still watch old Tex Avery shorts on the Cartoon Network. I can still listen to half-crazed talk show cranks. I can still buy a ridiculous array of tasty, unhealthy snacks at any convenience store—and the convenience store in my old neighborhood is still operated by Arab-Americans.

There have been real threats to our liberties since September: a USA PATRIOT Act that eviscerates the Fourth Amendment; a roundup of immigrants that's gone far beyond any reasonable protection against terrorism; a renewed impulse toward secrecy in the public sector and against it in our private lives; an airport security regime apparently designed to be as intrusive as possible; a political class calling for citizen snitches, secret tribunals, and a militarized national police force.

But it is still possible to dissent from the war on terrorism. It is still possible to make really inappropriate jokes about the war on terrorism. It's even possible, sometimes, to ignore the war on terrorism. The "new national purpose" we've heard so much about has not throttled the stuff of everyday life.

And people still remember *Bewitched*. It wasn't even a good show. But I'm glad we still have it. ■

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# WHO'S TO BLAME FOR 9/11?

PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS NEVER DIE—OR FADE AWAY! BY P. BAGGE '02 (PETERBAGGE@EARTHLINK.NET)

