

Evan Mecham: Humor in Arizona Politics

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THROUGH THE SPRING AND SUMMER OF 1987, Arizona residents had a wonderful time laughing about their newly elected governor, Evan Mecham. Monday mornings were brighter because people brought to work new jokes they had heard over the weekend. Children learned jokes at school and brought them home to their parents. Business people used them as icebreakers when they made phone calls, and newcomers to Arizona used them as tall tales to amuse friends and relatives back home.

When Evan Mecham won the gubernatorial election in November 1986, Arizonans already had a few mildly humorous Mecham jokes, like the one-liner about the shame of wasting a \$400 toupee on a two-bit head. However, the number and the hostility of the jokes increased in direct proportion to Mecham's political troubles.

His first political crisis came before he was inaugurated. He announced that former Governor Bruce Babbitt did not have the legal authority to declare a state holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, and Arizona would therefore not have the scheduled holiday. The opinion was supported by the state attorney general; nevertheless, Mecham was castigated as a villain for "rescinding" the holiday. Cartoonist Steve Benson showed Mecham sitting on Santa's knee "dreaming of a White Christmas" (*Arizona Republic*, 18 December 1986), and the Tribune newspapers carried a Gary Markstein cartoon showing a portrait of King saying, "I have a dream!" juxtaposed with a portrait of a villainous Mecham saying, "Dream on" (*Tempe Daily News Tribune*, 18 January 1987).

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Jokes about Mechem centered around particular themes, most notably his perceived racism and right-wing attitudes.

Did you hear that Mechem ordered the U. of A. School of Agriculture to develop chickens with only right wings and all-white meat?

and

Why did Mechem cancel Easter?

He heard the eggs were going to be colored.

It is interesting that over the months, the same people who were criticizing Mechem for racism began telling racist jokes covered with a thin veneer of anti-Mecham sentiment:

What are three things you can't give a black?

A black eye, a fat lip, and a Mechem Pontiac!

Mormonism was another popular theme, for example:

What Will Ev get now that he's stopped working for the Church and started working for the state?

Sundays off and a 10 percent pay raise.

Mormons laughed at this joke because it said something about how much their church expects its members to contribute in both time and tithing. Church members may also have been amused when joke tellers said that the governor was trying to bring the New Orleans Saints professional football team to Phoenix, but that he was going to rename it the Latter-day Saints.

Some liberal Mormons who were embarrassed by Mechem's conservative attitudes tried to distance themselves from him by talking about joining MOM (Mormons Opposed to Mechem) and laughing when their friends asked riddles like:

What's Mechem's idea of integration?

Eating breakfast with a Baptist.

But few Mormons, either liberal or conservative, laughed at a more hostile joke that came later:

Why does California have AIDS and Arizona has Mechem?

Because California got first choice!

On the surface, this joke that made the rounds in early spring of 1987 doesn't look as if it has anything to do with Mormons, but many Church members had already heard a different version of it:

Why does Phoenix have all the blacks and Mesa all the Mormons?

Because Phoenix got first choice!

For the past several years, Arizona State University has sponsored a WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) conference where psychologists, linguists, literary scholars, health workers, and others meet to discuss theories

and examples of humor. In April 1987 more than 600 scholars from the United States and thirty nations gathered in Arizona for the conference, which was co-sponsored by the Workshop Library on World Humor. Because the business of the people was analyzing humor and its uses, I presented a paper on Mecham jokes. It was the first public acknowledgment of the growing body of Mecham humor, and it received considerable publicity, partly because local newspapers had been looking for a way to print some of the jokes their reporters had been hearing.

The most popular joke at the time of the conference was a story about a fire at the governor's house that started in the library and burned both books — one hadn't even been colored in yet. A man from Germany recognized the story as having been told about the mayor of his hometown, and some participants remembered hearing similar jokes about Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950s and about George Wallace in the 1960s. One riddle,

What's the difference between George Wallace and Evan Mecham?

Well, George Wallace is paralyzed from the waist down . . .

showed that the creators of the jokes had also recognized similarities.

When the conference delegates went home, they took the Mecham jokes with them. An Australian newspaper called me to find the correct spelling of Mecham's name (the *New York Times* was still spelling it *Meacham*); the BBC called the Arizona State University News Bureau for an interview on Mecham jokes; Mark Russell wrote my husband, who chaired the conference, to say that political satirists the world over were facing Arizona and bowing in gratitude for the wealth of new material; and the governor's office called ASU to see if any state funds had been used to support the conference.

Later, an academic discussion of Mecham jokes probably would have gone unnoticed because Mecham humor would soon make it to the big time. Two books of jokes were printed (DMH 1987; Siegel 1987), several national magazines carried articles that included jokes, and both "Sixty Minutes" and "Nightline" did features on the controversial nature of Mecham's governorship.

The theory that I discussed at the conference was one presented at the 1984 WHIM Conference by Robert F. Priest, a psychologist at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point. He spoke about his theory of MICH (Moderate Intergroup Conflict Humor), the conditions under which people will engage in hostile humor. According to his theory, hostile humor occurs only when there is a moderate level of tension between two groups. If there is no tension, the jokes will not seem funny. And if there is open and bitter conflict, then derogatory jokes are not strong enough to satisfy the feelings of hostility. Tellers will feel more frustrated than satisfied.

Priest applied his theory to sexist humor, which has existed for centuries. However, as the women's movement has gained force and hostilities have increased between men and women, many people no longer consider sexist humor to be funny. In certain situations, it is even illegal (1985, 207).

I applied the MICH theory to jokes about Governor Mecham and predicted that Arizonans would not continue to create and enjoy such jokes for

the four years of the governor's term in office. If political tensions decreased, then people would become bored with the jokes; if, on the other hand, tensions increased, the jokes would no longer serve as a satisfactory means of releasing tensions. As it turned out, Priest's theory of Moderate Intergroup Conflict Humor described exactly what happened. As opinion polls showed Arizonans becoming less and less satisfied with their governor's performance, the jokes became more and more hostile (Tolan 1987). By the time of the impeachment hearings for Mecham in March 1988, the matter had become so serious that few people were still laughing.

A statement by Phoenix writers Philip L. Harrison and Dan McGowan illustrates the changed attitudes. In the summer of 1987 Harrison and McGowan had published the first collection of Mecham jokes (DMH 1987), but in April 1988 they explained in the *Metro Phoenix* magazine why they weren't going to put out a second edition:

... the jokesters are becoming acerbic, the jokes full of invective. For example:

Mecham recently opened a housing subdivision called "Mecham Meadows." Grand opening prizes: free wigs for the first 500 adults, handguns for all the kids.

They concluded that the "sense of bemused bewilderment" characterizing the early jokes was gone, and now "the jokes — and Mecham — ain't all that funny anymore" (1988, 106).

At least one joke reflected Mecham's claim that his political troubles came from a hostile press:

What do Mecham and an untrained puppy have in common?

They both cringe at the sight of a newspaper.

But many of the jokes that circulated orally were too hostile and scatological to print in newspapers or put on public airwaves. They were honest examples of folk humor.

Four Arizona cartoonists — the most notable being Steve Benson, grandson of Ezra Taft Benson — did the best work of their careers about Evan Mecham. So did several columnists. John Kolbe from the *Phoenix Gazette* became famous when Governor Mecham first forbade him to attend press conferences and then on reconsideration said he could attend but that he was a "nonperson" and his questions wouldn't be acknowledged. This inspired dozens of comments and jokes about nonpersons. The following letter to the editor from Richard Lucero was published in the *Arizona Republic* on 14 March 1987: "I was wondering, since Gov. Evan Mecham has declared John Kolbe a non-person, and Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday a non-holiday, could he make me a non-minority?"

Radio disc jockeys and talk-show hosts were also instrumental in establishing an atmosphere in which it was fashionable to make fun of the governor. Right after Mecham's inauguration, a KZZP disc jockey amused his listeners with a funny "Mr. Ev" parody of the theme song from television's show about

the talking horse, Mr. Ed. A month later, he did a parody based on the rock group Dead or Alive's hit song, "What I really need to do is find a brand new lover." The parody went, "What we really need to do is find a brand new governor." On 12 February Toni Stanton started her daily radio show in Tucson by referring to Ev Mecham as "the Fred Astaire of Hoof and Mouth Disease." On 18 March KTAR in Phoenix took advantage of Mecham's complaint that he wasn't getting a fair shake in the public media by inviting people to phone in and say something good about the governor. Some listeners interpreted this as an invitation for humor. The funniest was the man who in a deadpan voice explained that he was a drug addict and was extremely grateful that Mecham was going to provide him with drugs. "How's that?" questioned the surprised host. "Why, haven't you heard his slogan?" responded the caller, "A Drug Free Arizona."

Mecham appointed as his education advisor a retired, conservative dairy farmer, who encouraged the State Education Committee to favor a bill requiring that creationism be taught alongside evolution in public schools. He was widely quoted for saying that teachers have "no business correcting students whose parents teach them the earth is flat" (*Time*, 9 March 1987, p. 42). A KOY disc jockey asked callers to phone in suggestions about what to put in Mecham-look-alike piñatas, which he was supposedly going to sell for nine dollars. One caller suggested that he add a two dollar charity tax to purchase flat globes for schools. That same day, College of Education faculty members at Arizona State University found in their mailboxes fake membership invitations from the Flat Earth Society.

The ease and speed with which such items can be created and photocopied is a factor that earlier politicians have not had to cope with. Anonymously written parodies photocopied and distributed throughout the state pyramid-style included a clever two-page rendition of "'Twas the night before impeachment and all through the state . . ." and a "Dear Abby" column in which an anguished writer listed more problems than any one person could possibly have and then begged Abby to tell him if he has to confess to his fiancée that he is also related to Ev Mecham.

Bumper stickers sprouted like spring flowers:

Mecham for EX governor.

Martin Luther King had a dream. Arizona has a nightmare.

Don't blame me. I voted for Carolyn.

We'll all be gay when Mecham's recalled.

Impecham!

I'll take a urine test if Mecham will take an IQ test.

God — Leave Oral and take Ev.

Don't get mad! Get Evan!

One day after the impeachment vote, "Goodbye Mechey" stickers appeared illustrated with a drawing of Mecham in a Mickey Mouse hat, followed in a

couple of days with "Mofford ROSE to the occasion!" in honor of the new governor, Rose Mofford.

Some of the most hostile jokes about the governor were based on fill-in-the-blank patterns. For example, the name of any unpopular public figure could be written into this riddle:

What would be the difference if _____ and a skunk were run over on the highway?

There would be skid marks in front of the skunk!

The same pattern was used in this graffito, which appeared over toilet paper holders in restrooms: "Portrait of _____. Wipe to develop."

Philosopher Henri Bergson, in his 1911 essay "Laughter," wrote, "Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary" (1987, 119). When people laughed at the Mecham jokes, they experienced a bonding with the joketellers against the governor. This pleasant feeling of amusement and complicity — even if remembered only on a subconscious level — could have made people more likely to sign recall petitions, which some 350,000 Arizonans did between July and November 1987.

A generous interpretation of the joking is that Arizonans were using it for what Bergson described as a "social corrective" for the "utilitarian aim of general improvement" (1987, 125). Through ridicule, they were trying to teach the governor and like-minded people that certain behaviors and attitudes were inappropriate. A less generous interpretation is that liberal, educated Arizonans, who for years had refrained from telling racist, ethnic, and sexist jokes, were so relieved to have a socially acceptable target for hostile humor — a white, arrogant male in a position of power — that they pulled out all stops and had great fun retooling and retelling old, hostile jokes.

At the 1987 WHIM conference, James Eiseman and Stephen Spanghel, from the Department of Communication at the University of Louisville, discussed "The Role of the Innocent in Television Situation Comedy Series." Their comments relate to ex-governor Mecham in some interesting ways. They talked about television's power to purvey the myths that reflect and influence American thinking and conjectured that sitcoms are so popular because they "present and validate our underlying beliefs in ways that are otherwise rarely articulated or discussed" (1988, 326).

One of these myths centers around the "Innocent" included in nearly every sitcom. The Innocent reinforces our desire to believe in the self-made individual who succeeds without education and our willingness to place enormous trust in those who speak honestly and "from the heart." Eiseman and Spanghel described these Innocents as "naïve, simple, ingenuous, unsophisticated, natural, unaffected, guileless, and artless; they exhibit few traces of formal education, speak their minds frankly and openly, and understand what is said to them solely on the literal level" (1988, 326).

This is almost a perfect description of the way many of the Arizonans who chuckled over Mecham jokes viewed their governor. In the first few months of

his term, Mecham served as a real life icon for the kind of gentle fun usually associated with sitcoms. Mecham as a "Utah Mormon" could easily be added to Eiseman and Spangehl's description of the Innocent as outsider: Lisa, the city slicker in *Green Acres*; Radar, the Iowa farm boy in "M*A*S*H"; Woody, the Indiana hick in "Cheers"; Latka, the mechanic in "Taxi"; Mork, the alien in "Mork and Mindy"; and the Clampetts in "The Beverly Hillbillies."

According to Eiseman and Spangehl, a striking characteristic of Innocents is the way they interpret language in only a literal sense, an apt description of Mecham's response to the four-day vignette about his administration that Garry Trudeau drew for his "Doonesbury" strip in September 1987: "It's totally unfactual. There isn't any mirth in it" (*Mesa Tribune*, 1 Sept. 1987).

Two weeks after Mecham was criticized for telling a tourism group that when Japanese hear that Arizona has over 200 golf courses their eyes get round, he was still defending himself by saying that he hadn't insulted anyone because some Japanese, even in their own country, are having plastic surgery to get round eyes (Montini 1988).

This lack of understanding about language change and connotation is also what got him into trouble when he defended the use of the word "pickaninny" in Cleon Skousen's *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution*. Mecham said that when he was growing up blacks themselves referred to their children as pickaninnies (*The Washington Times*, 27 April 1987, 49). This gave rise to the witticism, "Pickaninny: What we did for governor."

Another characteristic of Innocents is that what at first appears to be stupidity becomes in time "a sort of non-linear logic." Even after being made aware of how others perceive a situation, the Innocent "turns the information to a laughable connection surprising to everyone" (Eiseman and Spangehl 1988, 326). In Mecham's case, people seriously debated whether it was stupidity or just his far-right slant that made him see things in such unexpected ways. Nevertheless, a script writer could hardly have come up with better "laughable connections" than Mecham's statement to a Jewish group about America being a great Christian nation, or his denial of bigotry by saying that he has black friends and that he employs black people not because they're black, but because "they are the best people who applied for the cotton-picking job" (Hoggart 1987).

Phoenix was one of the scheduled stops for Pope John Paul's September 1987 visit. When Mecham was asked on his KTAR "Talk with the Governor" radio show what he was going to say to the Pope, he responded, "Golly, I don't know. I don't know whether he speaks English or not." This spawned the last joke that Arizonans truly laughed at:

Did you hear what the Governor said to the Pope?

"How's the little woman?"

As long as Arizonans were looking at Mecham as an Innocent, they interpreted his gaffes as they would one of Lucy Ricardo's or at worst, Archie Bunker's. And they clung to the sitcom myth that even though Innocents have

a striking inability to use language as others do, they are competent in their particular occupations. Evan Mecham must be a good businessman just as Howard Borden is a good navigator on "The Bob Newhart Show"; Woody is a good bartender on "Cheers"; Felix is a good photographer on "The Odd Couple"; Wojohowicz is a good police officer on "Barney Miller"; George Utley is a good handyman on "Newhart"; and Radar O'Reilly is a good company clerk on "M*A*S*H."

By the time of the impeachment hearings in the spring of 1988, many Arizonans no longer thought of Mecham as an Innocent. The Innocents in the sitcoms do not become defensive or aggressive. They are loved by viewers and other characters on the show because they tolerate differences in others and have a wisdom about human relationships that transcends their lack of sophistication. Innocents do not demand that everyone else become like them, or suggest driving Mack trucks through adult bookstores, or jab their fingers at reporters demanding that they never ask "for a true statement again!" (*Arizona Republic*, 30 Sept. 1987).

Nevertheless it was this view of Mecham as an Innocent — not in the legal sense, but in the sit-com sense — that his attorneys relied on for the spring 1988 trial in which Evan and his brother Willard were acquitted of criminal intent in concealing a \$350,000 loan to his campaign fund. No one argued that the loan had not been concealed. Instead, the defense claimed that concealing the loan was a simple mistake made by a naive bookkeeper. The jury — and to a large part — the citizenry of Arizona bought the defense's portrait of Evan and Willard as innocents in a tainted world.

In the beginning, the jokes may have been Evan Mecham's nemesis, drawing attention to his faults while establishing a comradeship among his opponents. But in the end they may have been what saved him. As Cicero observed two thousand years ago, "People want criminals attacked with more forceful weapons than ridicule" (1987, 17). Since for over a year Evan Mecham had been closely tied in people's minds to jokes and ridicule, the prosecution had a difficult task trying to change the governor's image from that of bumbler to that of criminal.

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