

Leave Al Franken Alone

by Joe Mulder

As many of you may know, comedian and actor Al Franken is not only running for a Senate seat in Minnesota, he's locked in a tight battle with incumbent Republican Norm Coleman. Depending on which recent poll you look at, he's either up five points or down five points. Since Franken's fitness for the job is not the issue of this piece but since it can hardly go uncommented upon, let me say at the outset that he's a buffoon who would embarrass the state of Minnesota and the United States Senate, he seems to have run a low, shameful campaign, he is decidedly unqualified for the office he seeks and he would make Minnesotans long for the day when the worst political move they ever made was to elect Jesse "9/11 Was an Inside Job" Ventura as their governor. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* even endorsed Franken's Republican opponent, which would be rather like the NRA endorsing the candidacy of Michael Moore. That's how obvious it should be that Al Franken doesn't belong in the Senate.

That said...

Much of the opposition to Franken, at least from what I have seen, has focused not on the fact that until several months ago he was a comic and a show business personality – which should disqualify him for the Senate in a reasonable voter's mind – but rather on the *content* of the comedy he produced over the course of his career. I don't offend easily, but these particular attacks on Franken's material are offensive.

Of particular interest seem to be a piece that Franken wrote for *Playboy* in 2000, "Porn-O-Rama," and comments from a 1995 *New York Magazine* profile of "Saturday Night Live," in which Franken makes jokes about rape. Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat, urged Franken to acknowledge that the *Playboy* piece was "entirely inappropriate." Congresswoman Betty McCollum, a Democrat, said that "it is appalling that anyone could characterize rape, a violent and horrible crime, as a joke." State Representative Laura Brod, a Republican, said that such jokes and columns show "a pattern of behavior which is not suitable for a U.S. senator" (never mind the fact that jokes aren't "behavior," and that Franken's *actual* pattern of behavior, as far as his personal life goes, is that of a devoted, loving husband and father).

Such criticism of Franken demonstrates an absolute ignorance of the nature of his profession. I could explain why, but I'll let someone who is much funnier and much more successful than I – and, arguably, than Al Franken – lay out Franken's defense. In his 2006 book *You're Lucky You're Funny: How Life Becomes a Sitcom*, "Everybody Loves Raymond" creator Phil Rosenthal explains how comedy writing works:

Nothing is sacred. Nothing. It can't be. As of this

writing, there is a lawsuit pending that's gone all the way to the California Supreme Court – a female writers' assistant was apparently offended by things that were said in The Writers' Room of "Friends." I'm sorry, but if you got me on that stand, my defense would be, "I'm a comedy writer." As comedy writers, we're going to say every curse known to man, and then we're going to make up some more. We're going to insult you and me and everyone we know and don't know, we're going to make sex jokes that make *The Aristocrats* look like the Von Trapps. If you're coming in the comedy room, you're bound to be offended unless you leave Lady Bracknell outside, and we've had plenty of women on board who were filthier than any of us.

I hate that "Friends" lawsuit. They actually printed what was said in The Room. I always thought it was clear that, like Vegas, what went on in The Room, stayed there – the obvious reason being that the sheer idiocy that goes on behind the door could never translate to an outsider. It's very hard to convey to anyone outside the family that no one in that room sees the shit joke as the height of comedy – just the opposite – and the reason we laugh so hard is because of how "wrong" it is. The same goes for every other horrible, insensitive, shocking, moronic, junior high level of wit on display. But it's *our* room. It's only meant as a release to get us going, to warm up the car, so we can then do the best real comedy writing we can do, which is honest, hard work. And this work can't possibly get the respect it deserves in the real world when our stupid (but very necessary) behavior is described out of context, or in context for that matter.

The *New York Magazine* profile quotes "SNL" writer Franken, along with Norm Macdonald and Jim Downey (and outspoken conservative and an avowed Republican, respectively), tossing around ideas for a sketch involving a bottle of pills on Andy Rooney's desk (Macdonald had previously portrayed Rooney on the show). Rooney's possible responses to the discovery of the pills, suggests Franken, might include Rooney's revelation that he gives the pills to "60 Minutes" colleague Lesley Stahl, and then "when Lesley's passed out, I take her to the closet and rape her." When Macdonald suggests – quite astutely, in this columnist's opinion – that it would be funnier for Rooney to admit that he instead drugs and rapes "60 Minutes" correspondents Mike Wallace or Ed Bradley, Franken offers, "What about this: 'I drag Mike into my office and rape him. Right here! I guess that makes me bad.'"

From what I can tell, no evidence is given that such jokes made it into the final draft of the sketch, and the sketch itself was cut after dress rehearsal and never made it on the air. Now, if Rosenthal's description of the process is accurate – and in my experience with comedy writers and a comedy writers' room, it is – Franken should have what amounts to a

rock-solid, two-pronged defense for the rape jokes in particular.

For one, such comments are, like it or not, a necessary part of the creative process. One can't possibly edit one's thoughts if one hopes to produce the best possible material. Sure, *New York Magazine* was present and observing the proceedings, but, for all intents and purposes, Franken's comments were made in private, and should have no bearing on his fitness for the office of United States Senator.

For two, they *were* funny. I'm sorry, but picture Norm Macdonald, as Andy Rooney, saying, "I drag Mike into my office and rape him. Right here! I guess that makes me bad." *I guess that makes me bad.* Come on; that's hilarious.

The *Playboy* piece and the rape jokes surfaced in the summer; the latest attacks I've seen focus on a piece of video, apparently recently discovered, that shows Franken at the 2004 Republican convention, joking with a man who works as a sign language interpreter for President Bush. "You know what would have been really a funny, stupid thing for you to do," Franken says, and then launches into an improvised "skit" wherein the interpreter, rather than signing what Bush is actually saying, instead gives instructions to those who would do the President harm.

"Al-Qaeda friends of mine," Franken says, while doing fake sign language as the man he's talking to laughs, "I've scoped out the place. The way to get the President is to come through the kitchen, which is downstairs."

"Do you think this is 'funny'?" a title screen on the YouTube video says. Well, to be honest... kind of. It's really not bad, especially for an unrehearsed, off-the-cuff routine. 2004 Al Franken, remember, was not a United States Senator, nor was he a candidate for any kind of office. He was a satirist and a comedian and, as such, he reflexively thought of the most inappropriate thing that the President's sign language interpreter could possibly do. The juxtaposition of the acceptable with the unacceptable: is there a more basic tenet of comedic satire? I don't think so. Yes, I know all of our panties are supposed to get bunched by even the mere suggestion of violence against the President. I would submit, however, that Franken's comments do not technically even qualify. "You know what would have been hilarious for you to do, even though you obviously never would because it would be stupid and wrong..." hardly the stuff that terrorist threats are made of.

Franken, for his part, issued what I've come to call a Pussy Apology (wherein one trades in one's integrity and personal beliefs and issues an apology in the interests of professional expediency), saying in June that "for 35 years, I was a writer. I wrote a lot of jokes. Some of them weren't funny. Some of them were inappropriate. Some of them were downright offensive." He also said, "[i]t kills me that things that I said and wrote sent a message to some of my friends in this room

and people in this state that they can't count on me to be a champion for women, and for all the people in Minnesota, in this campaign and in the Senate. I am sorry for that."

Unlike Franken himself, I'm not willing to throw his remarkable career under the bus. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression mean, of course, the freedom to speak and express even unpopular, disgusting things. If only the expression of popular, pleasant sentiments is guaranteed, then such freedoms are meaningless. Deep down I know Al Franken knows this, and it was disconcerting to see him shit on the ideas with which he built his career and his fortune, all in the name of trying to achieve a filibuster-proof Democratic majority. We now know what he thinks is more important, I suppose. I understand why he did it, but I wish he hadn't apologized and lent credence to the notion that he has anything to apologize for.

And so, Minnesotans, when you go to the polls tomorrow, I would urge you to overwhelmingly reject Al Franken's candidacy based on his lack of experience, his arrogant, dickish temperament and his gross unfitness for the office, *not* based on the content of the material he produced during his comedy career. The material was in bounds, and usually very, very funny.
