Fools or court jesters were clownish figures kept by kings and queens in English courts during the Renaissance. Part entertainer, part counselor, and part satirical truth teller, a fool could and did become an important member of a monarch’s entourage. Because the fool was given leniency by a king or queen, he could deliver bad news about how the people were feeling toward the monarch without fear of punishment. The fool also used a mixture of humor and satire to gently poke fun at the monarch, though good-natured barbs were pointed enough that the monarch always got the joke. The monarch often relied on such shrewd commentary as needed perspective on his or her rule. In fact, Queen Elizabeth is said to have been upset with her fool for being too soft on her.

In much the same way, Stephen Colbert plays the nation’s fool. He himself has used the analogy, calling the character he plays “a fool who has spent a lot of his life playing not the fool.” By good-naturedly mocking (and exposing the hypocrisy of) the mainstream media, politicians, and others, he makes pointed commentary on how those in power attempt to both manipulate and win the trust of the American public.

**Scathing, Smart Commentary**
Colbert pokes fun at these figures and a vast array of topics—including religion, politics, sexuality, culture, racism, homophobia, marketing, hypocrisy, health, the media, technology, and
A New Twist on an Old Concept

more—in biting satire. Four nights a week on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, very few escape his scathing, smart commentary, all delivered under the auspices of his harmless news anchor personality. When he delivers monologues, he uses offensive, absurd statements to point out the absurdity and offensiveness of people who hold such views. He uses deadpan, error-filled observations to make light of the more ridiculous and unbelievable aspects of contemporary society. When he conducts interviews,

*Colbert’s absurd political commentator persona has made him a comedy star.*
Stephen Colbert can be pure clown, asking absurd questions of his guest. At the same time, he often asks pointed, clever questions that clearly reveal both his level of knowledge on a topic and the lack of critical thinking on the part of his interviewee. This combination of zaniness and cunning proves a winning combination that entertains as much as it illuminates.

The popularity of his show and his character has proven that Americans love and need their fool. His accolades have been serious and prestigious: Colbert was named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in 2006. He has also received Emmy awards, Peabody awards, and an honorary doctorate degree from Knox College. He has also reaped numerous silly honors and fun awards in the pop culture realm: for example, he has his own Ben & Jerry’s ice cream flavor (Americone Dream) and a namesake aircraft in the Virgin America fleet (Air Colbert). Whether the awards he has received are serious or silly, all serve to show the many ways in which the American public has embraced him, and on a variety of levels.

Many of these honors are the work of his active fan base, whom Colbert has dubbed the Colbert Nation. They regularly rally around his causes and eagerly follow whatever mission he gives them, whether it be editing websites to reflect Colbert’s opinion, or submitting his name to have ships, buildings, or mascots named after him. Colbert’s fans are so responsive to his orders, in fact, that the media has dubbed the way they respond to the products and people he promotes as the “Colbert bump.” The idea refers to the increase in sales, popularity, or notoriety people or products receive if Colbert promotes them. In this way, Colbert definitely wields more than a comedian’s influence, and he enjoys the role so much that he will actually refer to the phenomenon on the show should a guest underestimate the power of his fans’ loyalty.

*The Truth About Stephen Colbert*

Colbert’s status as a pop culture icon and his professional persona as a silly prankster or pompous idiot masks his sharp wit and intellectual approach to comedy. He makes astute observations