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Humanities

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### The American Problem of Independence

Americans often take pride in their independence from other countries. Many of them believe that to be truly independent, they must be different in every aspect, which can frequently make practical life harder. This contradiction can usually be used in a satire, which is a piece of writing or media that uses humor, irony, and exaggeration to expose or critique someone or something's vices or follies. For this issue, Saturday Night Live created a skit called "Washington's Dream," which was played on October 28th, 2023. This skit portrays actor and comedian Nate Bargatze as George Washington, who is explaining his vision for a new nation to his soldiers. The skit is set during the Revolutionary War and shows Washington rallying his troops before battle. His speech, however, is satirical and has an underlying message about American freedom. In "Washington's Dream," SNL uses rhetorical devices such as ironic contrast and exaggeration to critique how Americans' obsessions with freedom and uniqueness have resulted in a system that is confusing, inefficient, and unnecessary.

The sketch immediately uses juxtaposition to highlight the irrationality of American priorities, mocking how individuality turns into inefficiency by defining "freedom" through absurdly complicated measurement systems. Washington starts with a patriotic tone, declaring, "We fight for a country of our own, a new nation where we choose our own laws, choose our own leaders" (SNL 00:00:23). This familiar patriotic tone frames Washington to continue his speech about what America is so great for. However, he abruptly adds, "And choose our own systems of weights and measures" (SNL 00:00:27).

This sudden shift from American ideals to a random concern about measurement catches the audience off guard. SNL uses juxtaposition here to highlight the absurdity of connecting freedom with measurement systems. When the soldiers ask Washington to elaborate, he announces, “Our proud nation will measure weights in pounds and that 2,000 pounds shall be called a ton” (SNL 00:00:45). The words “proud nation” are used here to connect Washington’s dream to the American public. This suggests that these systems are widely accepted by the nation and that these choices are not just random. The satire deepens when a soldier asks, “And what will 1,000 pounds be called, sir?” and Washington replies, “Nothing. Because we will have no word for that” (SNL 00:00:55). Here, SNL uses deadpan irony to expose how Americans reject more logical measurements without a true reason. Instead of answering, Washington says, “And yet, we won’t. Because we are free men” (SNL 00:01:06). Rather than offering a logical explanation, he retreats into patriotic language, which satirizes how Americans often use nationalism to justify impractical or weird traditions such as the use of tons.

As Washington delves deeper into America’s measurement systems, SNL employs logical absurdity to satirize how the nation’s desire to be “different” makes everyday life more confusing. Washington acts like he is creating a perfect system, but in reality, he is describing chaos. He explains that “soda, wine, and alcohol” will be measured in liters while “for milk and paint, we will use gallons, pints, and quarts, God willing” (SNL 00:01:26). By comparing how some liquids will be measured differently, he creates a logical confusion that exposes American measurements as an inefficient system. Also, by adding the phrase “God willing,” he makes it seem like this rule is justified by religion, which satirizes how Americans often rely on religious justification to support traditions even if they don’t make sense. The logical argument is reinforced when the soldier asks, “How many liters are in a gallon?” and Washington casually replies, “Nobody knows” (SNL 00:01:30). This moment reinforces the sketch’s argument that Americans often follow systems without understanding them. The satire increases as Washington moves to measurements of length, explaining how inches, feet, yards, and miles are converted with no real pattern. For example, Washington proudly explains how many feet are in a mile by

saying, “5,280, of course. It's a simple number that everyone will remember” (SNL 00:02:14). The irony here lies in the fact that the number 5,280 is obviously not simple, yet Americans continue to accept it. Americans have been conditioned to accept a system that lacks logical sense, but follow it simply to be different from the rest of the world.

As Washington describes how rulers work, SNL emphasizes the theme that Americans create unnecessary complications as a form of national identity. Next, SNL satirizes rulers and how they critique American inconsistency. While Washington is describing how rulers will have centimeters and inches on the rulers, he says that the different units “don't line up, and they never will” (SNL 00:03:17). At first, this might just seem like a simple exaggeration, but in reality, it uses symbolic irony to create a deeper metaphor for how the Americans have committed to such an incompatible system. Americans have purposely not conformed with the rest of the world and are proud of it. This theme continues with the example of temperature. When Washington talks about the two temperature systems, he describes Celsius as a system that the whole world understands and Fahrenheit as the one that is “super random.” He then immediately says, “Our great nation will use the random one” (SNL 00:03:49). This reinforces the idea that American stubbornness often overrides logic. Despite the fact that using the “super random” one is illogical, the United States continues to use it. The final joke talks about selectively removing the British “U” from certain words. Washington himself says, “We will get rid of the U in a lot of British words like color and armor. But by God, we will keep the British U in the word glamour” (SNL 00:04:13). This satire on the Americans’ way of English is used to expose how much we want to be independent from Europe. This theme is reinforced by ending the satire with the idea that the U.S. will be “a melting pot of different measurements that will make European men throw tantrums” (SNL 00:04:25), which really shows how the system is there just to create contradictions. SNL wants to show that the ideas of independence have caused the Americans to make decisions purely based on being different from other countries.

Ultimately, “Washington’s Dream” uses satire to critique the American belief that freedom and individuality must always come at the cost of efficiency. Through exaggeration, irony, and absurd logic, SNL exposes how Americans defend inefficient and impractical systems based on only the idea that they symbolize independence. The sketch suggests that these impracticalities are not accidental but are actually encouraged and were put there as a form of national identity. SNL suggests through this sketch that Americans sometimes care too much about national pride, which can lead to unnecessary confusion. The sketch invites the audience to reconsider what true freedom means and whether independence can thrive without the need to always be different.

Works Cited

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