

Sam Wheatley

Ms.Small

Humanities

16 December 2025

Foreign Aid: Satire's Role in Addressing Misunderstanding

The issue of American foreign aid has been a sensitive topic for many years, especially following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. When people never see the real numbers and, instead, rely on word of mouth, their understanding can become skewed and disproportionate. By comparing the Congressional Research Service report IF10183 with John Oliver's episode "Afghanistan: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver," it becomes evident that each source attempts to address this misunderstanding in different ways. The CRS shows foreign assistance as a small portion of the federal budget with numbers, while Oliver satirizes the inefficiency and misplaced priorities to attempt to show how Americans see foreign aid as expensive. This contrast shows how satire can transform unengaging information into correcting public misconceptions with indirect critique or judgment.

To challenge this misunderstanding, the CRS presents statistical evidence while John Oliver uses satire to expose the exaggerated political claims. The CRS provides official statistics showing how much foreign aid was sent in the past years and how it compares to other federal spending. "[Foreign aid] represented about 1.5% of the total federal budget" (Congressional Research Service). It is also important to keep in mind that this is spread across around 175 countries and territories. The USA is also not the only country sending aid to these countries as well, which is a point brought up in John Oliver's piece. He then contrasts how representatives of the US speak on the topic as if they are spending a large percentage of the budget on foreign aid, when they truly aren't. Oliver includes a clip of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who argues that "We will not give them one red cent until such time as we can demonstrate that they

have actually done what they said they would do, which is separate themselves from terror.”

Oliver uses humor and caricature to bridge the gap between perception and jokes. While the CRS relied on factual evidence to correct those who have been fed misinformation, Oliver utilizes satire to confront the emotional roots of the misunderstanding.

Just by glancing at the CRS report, it is clearly outlined how much of the federal budget is out toward the foreign aid budget. When read by someone, it can be interpreted and hopefully the misunderstanding will come to light. There is even a breakdown on how the already small budget is split even further and where the money is being sent. Even outlining “Top U.S. bilateral aid recipients have been strategic allies, countries in humanitarian crisis, counterterrorism partners, and global health focus countries” (CRS). In John Oliver’s skits, he directly attacks the misunderstanding by using real examples of what is happening. Showing clips, such as ones of Republican politicians expressing their opinions on the subject, and immediately following it with a kick at how ridiculous they sound. As representative Ronny Jackson spoke on the topic of the foreign aid being sent to Afghanistan, he said “I’m not in favor of giving money that I’m pretty confident will end up in the hands of the Taliban,” (Oliver 15:30). Oliver then follows this up by specifically making fun of the politicians by calling them “Mike Pompeo and deep fake Blake Shelton,” (15:43) using a strategy to first lighten the situation before delivering the criticism. Satire is used throughout his bits in many ways as he tried to criticize how the public and politics distort the issue.

Beyond the misunderstanding of the amount that goes toward the foreign aid budget, the public often overlooks its purpose and real-world impact, a gap filled by the CRS with data and John Oliver with anecdotes. In the CRS report, it is clearly stated where the aid is going. By looking at Figure 1, it can be seen that 42% of the aid goes to peace and security, 14% to Humanitarian Assistance, and 10% to health. This outlines how the money is spent and where it is intended to be put towards. A common misconception is that the nation just receives aid, but there is intent behind every dollar so that it aligns with the opinions of the US. To appeal to

pathos, John Oliver actually shows where the money goes. He recalls stories of how our aid was helpful and transformed communities. He brings in the interview with Vivki Aken, the Afghanistan director on the International Rescue Committee, where she responds to many not wanting to give aid to Afghanistan because they don't want to give money to the Taliban by saying "So you want to make 38 million people suffer because of a few thousand? That math doesn't work for me" (Oliver 16:31). When relating this to the reactions of Americans about the budget, he addresses the crises of the 'America first' mindset and how it is problematic. By presenting the human cost of cutting aid, Oliver makes the consequences of misinformation tangible. While the CRS explains where money goes, Oliver forces viewers to confront what happens when that aid gets cut.

Rather than actively confronting the ignorance of the public, the CRS passively discloses the reason by presenting the information that many Americans chose to not engage with, but John Oliver directly challenges the political and societal forces that continue this trend. When reading the CRS, it is clear that any misunderstanding is due to ignorance. With all of the information given, such as an overview of the historical trends and the role of congress, addressing that "[f]oreign aid levels have fluctuated depending on U.S. policy, crises abroad, and budget constraints," indicates it is budgeted properly due to the surrounding conditions of the country. In addition to providing a timeline, such as "[f]or FY2018-FY2021, the first Trump Administration proposed deep annual cuts to foreign assistance; Congress opted to maintain or increase foreign aid," the CRS supports this argument by further explaining that "[f]ocus areas included countering the global influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia (including through a new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation); humanitarian crises; and global health, including the COVID-19 response" (CRS). Most don't bother themselves with reading government documents and would rather consume the more entertaining media on the subject. Going against this, John Oliver makes the point that the root cause of the misunderstanding is fueled by political manipulation and the media. Regardless of

one's own opinion, they are more likely to align their view with the political party they follow and blindly follow them. This is a great concern as many continue to be left uneducated on what they 'support.' Oliver makes the point that having an opinion on a subject requires an emotional connection rather than just going with what your representative also supports.

Ultimately, while both the CRS report and John Oliver's Afghanistan address the widespread misunderstanding surrounding American foreign aid, Oliver's satirical approach proves to be more effective. The CRS may be more clear and provide accurate data that shows how small the foreign aid budget actually is, but its sole appeal to logos assumes that the readers are making an effort to read this government document. On the other hand, Oliver confronts the emotional and political forces that shape public opinion by exposing exaggerated claims and contrasting facts with humor and bringing personal anecdotes. By bringing the consequences of misinformation to light, Oliver succeeds in challenging ignorance that the raw data from the CRS could not. This comparison shows that factual reports may have more accuracy, it is satires that often prove to me more powerful in influencing people and correcting their misconceptions.

Works Cited

“Afghanistan: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO).” *You Tube*, YouTube,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2hw_ghPcQs. Accessed 16 Dec. 2025.

U.S. Foreign Assistance | Congress.Gov | library of Congress, (n.d.).
<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10183> Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.