

# The Interesting Reactions to Don Rickles' Obama Joke

☒ Like many, I consider legendary comedian Don Rickles to be a comedic genius. Though I'm a bit young to have enjoyed his work while he was in his prime, I've always gotten a kick out of his appearances on late-night television shows, and his acting in re-runs of some of the classic television sitcoms he guest-starred on. From his hard-edge, insulting style and quick-wit to his hilarious mannerisms, it's hard not to marvel at the man's talent.

What I didn't realize until just a couple of years ago was something that pretty much everyone else had apparently long been aware of: Just how ethnically offensive Rickles' standup comedy act is. I rented a documentary on Rickles from 2007 entitled, *"Mr. Warmth: The Don Rickles Project."* Only being a casual fan, I had never actually seen one of his uncensored routines. Quite frankly, I was shocked by its content. Jews, Asians, African Americans, the Irish... They were all broken down into the bigoted stereotypes of decades past. Forget the era of political correctness. Rickles' jokes seem to pre-date even the civil rights movement.

The common message from celebrity friends of his, who were interviewed for the documentary, was that Rickles himself is certainly no bigot or racist. Even the hardest-left of the bunch (Roseanne Barr, Sarah Silverman, Kathy Griffin, Carl Reiner, and Whoopi Goldberg) explained that Rickles is essentially *in character* when he's on stage, and his style is a throwback to the "Golden Age" of standup comedy when performers could freely deliver insulting, racially insensitive diatribes. All of his friends conceded that Rickles is probably the only comedian today who could get away with such rankness, due to his legendary status.

Though the double-standard makes me uncomfortable, it's an argument I've bought into. I've never been one to hastily throw around blanketing accusations of racism (which happens far too often these days) and I'm inclined to recognize Rickles' art form as lighthearted, equal-opportunity denigration.

The consensus seems to be that Rickles can say whatever he wants because he's, well... Don Rickles. Fair enough.

That's why I found it so interesting a couple of days ago when headlines like, "Don Rickles Shocks Hollywood Crowd With Racial Obama Joke", began to appear across the internet. Numerous media sources described a scene that occurred last Thursday night at the American Film Institute's tribute to actress Shirley MacLaine. Don Rickles was a featured speaker at the event, and he made the following joke in front of a microphone:

"I shouldn't make fun of the blacks. President Obama is a personal friend of mine. He was over to the house yesterday, but the mop broke."

The *Hollywood Reporter* reported that the black-tie crowd gasped in reaction to the joke which was said to have "bombed". The *Drudge Report* and numerous other news-sites linked to the story, and the topic was discussed on a number of cable-news shows. *The Politico* actually felt the need to contact Rickles' people for comment, who made it clear that Don is not a racist. Regardless, Viacom (who owns TV Land) announced days later that the joke will be edited out of the television broadcast of the event, which is planned for June 24th. Their decision was reported by ABC News among others.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that Rickles' joke wasn't funny. Even beyond the realm of political correctness, it was lazy at best.

What kind of fascinates me, though, is the reaction the joke

has received. There seems to be a consensus that the quip was newsworthy. Enough media outlets have picked up on the story to conclude that. And judging by the reactions of both the Hollywood elites who were in attendance, and Viacom, the joke apparently crossed a line that they weren't comfortable with.

My question in both cases is... Why?

If even the ultra politically-correct society we live in today has deemed Don Rickles a pass on his choice of comedy, why is such a joke a controversy?

After all, the celebrity-roasts that Viacom has aired on its Comedy Central channel have proudly featured far more offensive rhetoric than anything that came out of Don Rickles' mouth last Thursday. If you don't believe me, just watch their roast of William Shatner and the types of jokes that were made at George Takei's expense.

To me, it seems that the controversy comes directly from the fact that Rickles' joke was aimed at the sacred cow of Hollywood elitism: President Obama.

I wish I could say it stems from Hollywood's reverence to the office of the presidency, but that's clearly not the case. Hollywood liberals and Viacom were never queasy when it came to raking President Bush over the coals. Virtually nothing was off-limits when it came to Bush, even on TV Land whose annual award show featured presenters that regularly skewered the president.

No, it's different because it's Barack Obama. That's what makes it controversial. That's also what makes it yet another example of how defensive the left, in this case Hollywood, has been of the president since he took office.

Liberals were taken back by the joke because, with Obama, they felt it was overboard. I'm pretty confident that if Rickles had made the same joke about Herman Cain, there would have

been no collective gasp and Viacom would not have edited it out of the broadcast. After all, Viacom didn't edit out Jon Stewart's controversial Herman Cain impersonation on Comedy Central's *Daily Show*.

Conservatives, on the other hand, are fascinated with the story because they don't often hear stinging jokes made about President Obama, especially by Hollywood darling like Don Rickles. It's something very rare.

In the end, the overall reaction to the joke is more of a symptom of the kid-gloves President Obama has been approached with over the past four years, than it is anything else. Don Rickles should be left to be *Don Rickles*. How is it fair for Hollywood to suspend the exemption they've long given to Don Rickles' humor in order to maintain the exemption *from* humor that they've given to Barack Obama?