He’s not an ultra-conservative, finger-pointing idiot he just plays one on TV. Meet the
It's been a banner year—for Stephen Colbert. With cock-sure, straight-laced patriotic swagger, a larger-than-life Colbert looks down from a mountaintop onto New York's Times Square. "The Colbert Report—it's what Lincoln would have watched," the two-story billboard proclaims. Several blocks away on West 54th Street, hip, youngish fans gather beneath the blue "Colbert Report" studio awning, waiting for tickets to see their hero—with his expertly arched brow and searing wit—in action. A million and a half others across this great land tune in to Comedy Central at 11:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday to watch the eagle land just for Colbert. "MegaAmerican," "Fearless," "Relentless" flash across the screen as the show begins.

After six years as a writer, senior political correspondent, and famed "This Week in God" reporter for Comedy Central's The Daily Show, the Emmy Award-winning Colbert launched his own program this past October. Airing immediately after The Daily Show—hosted by Jon Stewart—the Colbert Report, which occupies the former Daily Show studio, began by riding Stewart's wake: "I prefer to think of The Daily Show as the warm-up for The Colbert Report, you know, the appetizer before the main meal," Colbert wags. These days, he's creating his own wake. What Jon Stewart is to the news, Colbert is to the media. Or in his words: "As warmth is to the sun, I am to truth." His shtick is an over-the-top self-righteous parody of bullheaded conservative pundits like Bill O'Reilly, Joe Scarborough, and Sean Hannity, and Colbert's dead-on media mockery has made the Charleston native a darling of the press. Recent stories in Newsweek, the New York Times, The New Yorker, 60 Minutes, and Men's Vogue among others have lauded his talent and tracked his rising fame. In the last year alone, in addition to creating, starring in, and producing his own show, he coined the Word of the Year—"Truthiness" (as pro-

A Times Square billboard is one sign of Colbert's success; 1.5 million viewers tuning each evening is another.

The cast of Comedy Central's The Daily Show after their Emmy win in September 2005. From left: Stephen Colbert, Rob Corddry, Jon Stewart, Ed Helms, and Samantha Bee.
**On The Colbert Report,**
Stephen Colbert is a clean-cut, buttoned-down, finger-pointing, ultra-conservative, high-status idiot who only looks and sounds like Stephen Colbert.
Stephen Colbert

FEATURE:stephen colbert FEATURE 4/18/07 2:57 PM  Page 7

claimed by the American Dialect Society), had a movie premiere (flourished, starring, Nicole Kidman), signed a book deal, hosted the infamous White House Correspondent’s Dinner and has another movie, Strangers With Candy, opening this summer. Not bad for the runner-up of the 1981 Charleston County High School Debate Championship. And not surprising, either, say those who know him well and know him well.

“Stephen was always well-mannered, well-spoken, and very fast on his feet,” says former Porter Gaud music teacher and Glee Club director Ben Hutto, who is now director of performing arts at St. Alban’s School for Boys and National Catholic School for Girls in Washington, D.C. “He was a cut-up in high school, and everyone was fair game, but the things that make his on-air persona endearing are the same things that were endearing about him as a student. He was witty, insightful, sharp, clever, charming, and personable, and great at exposing others’ vulnerabilities without being mean-spirited or derogatory.” According to Chip Hill, Colbert’s close friend, high school buddy, and godfather to one of Colbert’s sons, “Stephen has a magnetic personality;” he says of the one-time Dungeons & Dragons fanatic: “He was so funny—he made it cool to be smart and kind of geeky. He loved science fiction and fantasy. He always said he was going to major in mass communications and start his own cult.”

Road to the Report

Judging by the number of fan blogs and Colbert-related websites (including Colbert Nation, www.colbertnation.com, where you can buy merchandise, download a Stephen screensaver or get Stephen podcasts on iTunes), he got his start. Colbert makes fun of the American media while the media makes fun of the American media. Eventually Colbert, along with his Second City collaborators Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello, left Chicago for New York, where they created the sketch comedy Exit 57 for HBO Downtown Productions and the surreal TV series Strangers with Candy, a spoof on sappy, moralistic after-school specials (the trio are co-writers/producer/stars of the movie premiering this summer, featuring Sarah Jessica Parker and Philip Seymour Hoffman). Although Colbert’s many credits include stints on The Dana Carvey Show, Saturday Night Live, and even Good Morning America, the offer to work on The Daily Show came during a year-long dry spell. Somewhat desperate, with a wife and young baby at home, Colbert took the job. “But I thought the show was a terrible idea,” he admits. “Then I got there and realized this was a great group working really hard, and I learned to love the people. I was working with Though I left for three years in the middle, I was so happy to come back for the 2000 campaign. By that time Jon (Stewart) had taken over, and boy, what a great show he’s developed!”

Family Entertainment

Charleston fans in particular might identify with some of The Colbert Report’s antics. For instance, Stephen’s South-of-Broadish portrait within a portrait within a portrait that hangs above the set’s faux fireplace (“Ah, statuette!”) and boy, what a great show he’s developed! Stephen’s mother, Lynn Colbert, and brother and sister and their respective broods all live in the area, as do his in-laws, Peter and Patty McGee, and sister-in-law, Madeleine McGee. As the youngest of 11 children (“Jim&fLindaBillMargoTomJay ElizabethPeterPaulStephen,” which he rattles off in a hilarious haphazard fashion), Stephen never lacked an audience, or competition. “All my children are funny,” says Lorna, who herself aspired to be an actress before being sidetracked by 11 children. “Our name might be Col-burt or Col-bear, Stephen and his 11 brothers and sisters have your typical traditional-values Charleston viewer. Nonetheless, Colbert does have a die-hard contingent here among the family-values crowd. Namely, his own family.

Stephen’s in a 1983 Spoleto Festival poster. Whether they pronounce it Cole-burt or Cole-bear, Stephen (at bottom in blue coat) and his 11 brothers and sisters have
Jay, the seventh in line and a seventh-grade social studies teacher in Dorchester County, claims his baby brother was always entertaining. "There was the incident on my father's birthday—Stephen wasn't even three yet. I heard this excited voice coming from the dining room, and went to look in, and son of a gun if there weren't two perfect little footprints right in the middle of the cake and a trail of frosting leading out the door! But my father let it go, he adored Stephen—they were especially tight, " says Jay. Tragically, Dr. Colbert, an immunologist at MUSC, and two of Stephen's brothers, Paul and Peter, were killed in an airplane crash in 1974 on their way back to boarding school in Connecticut. Stephen was 10 years old. The loss was devastating, but served to strengthen the already-tight Colbert bond. "We're a very close family. There's nothing we like better than getting together," says Jay. When they do, laughs are constant and conversation is lively. "No one is shy in my family. They jump right in," says Mrs. Colbert, adding that Stephen often cooks for the clan, whipping up meals with typical improvisational flair.

"I never had a doubt that Stephen would be successful even when he was starving in Chicago, back when he took cream and sugar in his coffee because 'it's food,' I knew he'd make it," his proud mom says. "I love the show. I think it's fantastic—it means I get to visit with my son every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night!"

Staying Tuned In

Of course, the downside for the bluffing star is that he rarely gets to spend evenings with his own three children, Madeleine, 10, Peter, seven, and John Paul, four. Producing 22 minutes of on-camera, original comedy four nights a week, 42 weeks a year is daunting (91 people work on the show), and it means Colbert "only get spurts of family time; for now anyway," he says. Still, his wife and the kids are priority. The 'billy dad' will forgo an opportunity to appear on Late Night with Conan O'Brien if it means making it to son Peter's swim meet. When they do get time off, the Colberts spend much of it, including six weeks in
the summer, with their extended family in Charleston and on Sullivan’s Island. “We both share a love of Charleston; it’s so much a part of who we are,” Evie says. Last year Stephen joined a crew of old Charleston friends for the Charleston to Bermuda sailboat race. He was head chef, chaplain, and chief morale officer for Team Tao, which finished a respectable tenth in the 21-boat pack, despite the unpleasant misfortune of a broken toilet and sump pump on their second day out. Colbert, the consummate good sport, did much of the messy bailing—bathroom humor comes in handy.

Though laughter may be the best medicine, pluff mud has its place. When asked what he does when he’s in town, the pithy fake pundit turns downright eloquent: “Once I cross the Ben Sawyer Bridge, I try not to cross back over. I try not to drive. I try not to wear long pants. I try to go swimming, no matter what time of year it is. I go fishing. When I was a kid, there was a Japanese monster TV show called Ultra Man. Ultra Man could do anything, fighting monsters in his big silvery suit, but he could only fight so long before he had to return to his solar system to be recharged by the light of his home sun. That’s what it’s like for me—I have to go home every so often to be recharged by my home sun. It’s medicinal for me to float in a creek. It’s necessary. I have to get under the water, that green-brown water. I have to get muddy. I have to smell low tide. I have to eat oysters; I have to catch my dinner. I have to do it. We spend as much time in Charleston as we can, so our children will know how to

I love the show I get to visit every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night!” —Lorna Colbert

Truthiness aside, that’s the real Stephen Colbert.