

# Bush's Pretzel

*By ACSH Staff — February 1, 2002*

Sometimes, a national crisis strikes a sudden reminder of mortality that makes the average citizen stop and rethink his priorities. So it was for many of us recently when President Bush choked on a pretzel.

Indeed, I declare Bush's pretzel-choking incident the rebirth of irony.

After months of Americans fearing death by terrorist pilot and death by anthrax threats, frankly, too large and horrible to be genuinely funny along came the pretzel incident to remind us of three important truths:

First: *Often in life, there is a painfully short distance between the important and the absurd.* One minute, you're the leader of the free world, faced for the first time in a decade with a foe of globe-straddling proportions, in a conflict that may decide the fate of the modern world. The next, you're just a mortal man, choking on a pretzel. We could ill afford the luxury of noticing such absurdity at the height of the Al Qaeda conflict, but absurdity endures.

Second: *Death knows no ideology.* We can argue endlessly about the meaning of the Koran, the clash of civilizations, airport security, or America's proper relationship to Israel, but sometimes the brute, physical facts of nature overwhelm subtler, cultural concerns. Death specifically premature death is not good, as both 9/11 and the pretzel incident served to remind us. It must be resisted, prevented when at all possible, whether it comes calling in the form of a vengeful terrorist, a pretzel, or common household accidents. Survival is the first, most primal priority.

Third: *Health matters.* Just as the nation was largely unified at the outset of the Al Qaeda conflict by fear of an outside enemy, so too should we be united in our desire to improve health and extend life. Science belongs to us all, and in a world of factionalism and infighting, its sound counsel should be something we can all respect and from which we can all benefit. Without it, we would die more frequently not only from pretzels but from countless other menaces that nature inflicts upon us, from malaria to cancer.

Like many writers, I sat through the Al Qaeda conflict thinking that I had nothing very valuable to say. Indeed, I felt a bit guilty about having devoted so much energy to analyzing petty things from science fiction to income tax forms in my writing prior to the conflict. I also felt guilty about being funny. But now, I hope that by editing [HealthFactsAndFears.com](http://HealthFactsAndFears.com), I'll be able to make a concrete difference in people's lives, promoting science and happiness, combating ignorance and disease, and once more use humor in the process. As Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, and others have taught us, humor and the telling of important truths can go hand in hand. That satirical/educational impulse was one of the better aspects of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. So, one can sometimes fight the good fight do something that makes a difference without becoming a grim-faced warrior.

Irony needn't entail indifference.

But there was a less highbrow motivation amongst my reasons for becoming editor of HealthFactsAndFears.com: Over the past several years, without a website to serve as a venue for my daily musings, my sending of stupid e-mails to my friends and acquaintances increased at a geometric rate.

According to statistics kept by friend Scott Nybakken (who saves the e-mails he receives and files them by the name of the sender), the following are the numbers of e-mails I sent on which he was cc'ed in each of the past six years, on topics ranging from politics to comic books:

1996: 50 e-mails

1997: 107 e-mails

1998: 136 e-mails

1999: 225 e-mails

2000: 348 e-mails

2001: 533 e-mails...

Clearly, things were headed in a dangerous, obsessive direction unless I channeled my efforts into an online magazine. Welcome, then, to the New Enlightenment, to irony and truth, and to the era of HealthFactsAndFears.com.

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