



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on September 10, 2012

Congresswoman: New York Permitted Slavery In Late 19th Century

Yet another politician has provided a startling picture of the intellectual acumen of who Americans elect to office.

Rep. [Yvette Clarke](#), a leftist congresswoman from New York, [told comic Stephen Colbert](#), who hosts *The Colbert Report* on the Comedy Channel, that the Dutch still owned slaves in New York in 1898. Her thoroughly ridiculous utterance, however, isn't the only one we've heard of late.



In 2010, a colleague asked an admiral, during a committee hearing on the deployment of U.S. Marines to Guam, whether the Island might capsize if too many Marines landed there.

Yvette Clark – Not An Historian

Beginning yet another far-fetched parody of asking a politician serious questions, the left-wing Colbert asked Rep. [Clarke](#), who represents the [11th District of New York](#), whether the decision of Brooklyn to join the city of New York was a mistake. Brooklyn is in the 11th District.

[Said Colbert](#), "Some people have called Brooklyn's decision to become part of New York City 'The Great Mistake of 1898.' If you could get in a time machine and go back to 1898, what would you say to those Brooklynites?"

Clarke: Now, now, am I going back not knowing what I know now?

Colbert: No, knowing what you know now ... And you're a going back there to send them a message.

Clarke: I would say to them, "Set me free."

The audience laughed, and indeed laughed throughout the entire silly interview, as they normally do during one of Colbert's take-downs of the high and mighty.

Colbert: From what?

Clarke: Slavery.

Colbert: Slavery. Really? I didn't realize there was slavery in Brooklyn in 1898.

Clarke: I'm pretty sure there was.

Colbert: Sounds like a horrible part of the United States that kept slavery going until 1898.... Who would be enslaving you in 1898 in New York?

Clarke: The Dutch.

Colbert: Those sneaky Dutch bastards.

Clarke: Exactly.

Critics: Representative Should Know Her History



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For one thing, although the Dutch settled what they called [New Amsterdam](#), the capital of New Netherland, by 1898 their control had long since been over. The [Dutch surrendered](#) the city to Britain in 1674 under the terms of the [Treaty of Westminster](#), receiving Suriname in return. And by 1898, what Dutch there were paled in number next to [the Irish, Italians, and Russian Jews](#). As well, the state [abolished slavery](#) in 1817, setting July 4, 1827 as the day when all blacks in the state would be free.

The *New York Daily News* sought out someone in the Brooklyn Historical Society to comment upon Clark's thigh-slapper. "Oh, my goodness!" Julia Golia "exclaimed," the [newspaper reported](#). "Oh, no! There wasn't slavery in Brooklyn in 1898." An historian of the borough told the newspaper Clark's remarks are "inexcusable," while her defeated opponent in the Democrat primary, Sylvia Kinard "said her comments show 'the quality and intelligence of representation' in the district."

Others weren't so kind, the [newspaper reported](#). "She's crazy," one woman told the newspaper. "Why would she say that? She's supposed to have knowledge of these things, especially for her own neighborhood."

[According to](#) the *News*, "Clarke, a former city councilwoman, came under scrutiny for lying in campaign literature in 2004 and 2005 by claiming she graduated from Oberlin College. She attended the school, but didn't graduate. She blamed a bad memory for those misrepresentations."

As to the Colbert disaster, Clarke's spokeswoman, Kristia Beaubrun, said her boss was just joking. "It's supposed to be humorous."

Based on the feedback that we're getting, some viewers understood that and some viewers did not understand," she said, adding that Clarke couldn't comment because she was at the Democratic National Convention.

Guam Might "Tip Over"

That's exactly what Rep. [Hank Johnson](#) (D-Tenn.), said after he made a fool of himself two years ago; i.e., he was just joking.

During a hearing of the [House Armed Services Committee](#), Johnson [actually asked](#) Adm. [Robert F. Willard](#), who commands the [U.S. Pacific Command](#), whether too many Marines going to Guam might not cause the island to "tip over." That exchange [went like this](#):

Johnson: Now, this is a, uh, island that at its widest level is, what, 12 miles from shore to shore and at its smallest level, uh, uh, smallest, uh, uhhhh, location it's, uh, seven miles, uh, between one shore and the other. Is that correct?

Willard: I don't have the exact dimensions, but to your point, sir, I think Guam is a small island.

Johnson: Very small island and about 24 miles, if I recall, long, 24 miles long, about seven miles wide at the least widest, uh, place on the island and about, 20, about 12 miles wide, uh, uh, on the widest part of the island. And, um, I don't know how many square miles that, that is. Do you happen to know?

Willard: I don't have that figure with me, sir. I can certainly supply it to you if you'd like.

Johnson: My, my fear is that, uh, the whole island will, uh, become so overly populated that it will tip over, and uh, and capsizes.

Willard: We don't anticipate that. The Guam population, I think, currently about 175,000 and again with 8,000 Marines and their families, it's an addition of about 25,000 more into the population.



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Johnson then expressed his concerns about the environmental degradation of the island.

After the video of Johnson's performance went viral and made him a laughing stock in every office and home with an Internet connection ([one version](#) received 3.4 million views), which, naturally, enough, sent his office into damage control mode.

"The subtle humor of this obviously metaphorical reference to a ship capsizing illustrated my concern about the impact of the planned military buildup on this small tropical island," [a spokesman said](#). Then [Johnson elaborated](#):

I wasn't suggesting that the island of Guam would literally tip over. I was using a metaphor to say that with the addition of 8,000 Marines and their dependents —an additional 80,000 people during peak construction on the tiny island with a population of 180,000 — could be a tipping point which could adversely affect the island's fragile ecosystem and could overburden its stressed infrastructure. Having traveled to Guam last year, I saw firsthand how this beautiful — but vulnerable island — could easily become overburdened, and I was simply voicing my concerns —albeit with a dry sense of humor — that the addition of that many people could tip the delicate balance and do permanent harm to Guam.

Watching the video doesn't show that he's joking at all, given that he doesn't even crack a smile and neither he nor Willard laugh. Rather, Johnson appears to be drunk or affected by some sort of medication. His speech was lethargic and bordered on slurred.

In December 2009, a few months before Johnson's strange performance, [the Atlanta Journal Constitution reported](#) that he was suffering from Hepatitis C. The newspaper reported that Johnson "has shed 30 pounds in the past year. His speech is slower than ever, and he regularly gets lost in thought in the middle of a discussion. He is easily fatigued and often impatient and irritable."

Photo: Yvette Clarke (right) with fellow congresswomen Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio (left) and Laura Richardson of California (center).



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