

The Daily Show's limits

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"Open conversation that leads to nothing."

That's how Jon Stewart summed up his interview with popular right-wing historian [David Barton](#). He was right. After 30 minutes of glib back-and-forth with Barton (ten of which made it onto TV), Stewart was flummoxed, worn down, unfunny:

[The Daily Show - Exclusive - David Barton Extended Interview Pt. 3](#)

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As the air left the room, the conversation exposed the gaping ideological divide between Americans--and the challenges we face in bridging it.

Conservatives who go on the *Daily Show* usually end up looking the fool. But Stewart met his match in Barton, an ideological warrior revered by Glenn Beck and Mike Huckabee. Stewart's razor wit and trademark blue index cards were no match for Barton's prodigious memory and unwavering insistence that [America's Christian founding](#) has been erased by secular elites.

The show's staff probably thought Barton could be caricatured as a half-crazed ideologue, unconcerned with larger inconvenient truths. Perhaps they figured that a few well-chosen facts that don't fit his God-and-country narrative would render him speechless, that he would crumble under the relentless ironic jabs. But if it were just a matter of enumerating quotations and dates, members of Congress wouldn't be calling Barton to provide them with the founders' views on deficits, stem cell research and stimulus programs. Barton offers his listeners something much more alluring.

One thing we learned from Stewart's tête-à-tête with Barton is that anecdote-ridden claims can't be countered with more anecdotes. What Stewart never articulated was the essential function of history--using the preponderance of evidence to provide a credible context for understanding the past and the present. Barton presents himself as the high priest of founding texts and the arbiter of honest truth. He's not, of course. But it's going to take patient, gritty work to convince folks otherwise.

Barton's carefully crafted image as a just-the-facts historian is key to his success. He insists again and again that we should read our primary-source documents just as we *should* read the Bible: unmediated. Too many professional historians, he scoffs, simply cite each other and repeat liberal platitudes.

Barton's stories are made still more effective because he presents them in slick, satisfying and easily digested form. He brings props to his lectures. He reveals a tiny Bible to which he says that the early Congress gave its blessing. He tells people that they have been lied to and that their schools are under assault. He claims that historians have hid the fundamental truth of a Christian founding. It's a story that resonates.

Barton is flat wrong about many things. He likes to point out, for example, that a number of the signers of the Declaration of Independence went to "seminary"--without mentioning that in the 18th century, the word meant simply "college." Nor does he tell his audience that only a fraction of these "seminary" graduates were orthodox Christians, or that they generally refrained from using religious language in their formal deliberations.

Note the word "generally." Barton is all about exceptions rather than rules, whether he's hunting down Jefferson's occasional references to God or exaggerating some modern-day secularist's impact. But good history goes where the *weight* of evidence leads it. That's why the small lies that Barton tells pale in comparison to the more insidious one: the claim that he has access to evidence that others--for nefarious, anti-Christian reasons--want to suppress.

This allegedly unique stash of original documents is Barton's ace-in-the-hole. Of course, nearly every historian has access to the same documents--and many more. The difference is that they don't treat their patiently excavated findings as if they were the protagonists in a Dan Brown novel. Instead, they carefully evaluate the evidence on the basis of what many thousands of others have already discovered.

Barton's *Daily Show* appearance didn't just demonstrate that America's foremost far-right historian could withstand the withering assault of America's foremost left-leaning comedian. We were also reminded how much our culture depends on non-expert polemicists such as Stewart to undermine dogma and satirize paranoia--in 30-minute segments. Stewart [likes to point out](#) that he's just a comedian. We need to keep this in mind--and to prepare ourselves for the hard, generally unfunny slog of straightening the record.