# Mount Rushmore: The Rise of Talk Radio and Its Impact on Politics and Public Policy

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August 1, 1988 marked a monumental change in the radio business and the political world. Yet, on that day, even avid news followers and people in radio or politics likely had no clue that something special had occurred. In fact, only a small audience tuned in¹ as a failed disc jockey and former Kansas City Royals executive named Rush Hudson Limbaugh III debuted a nationally syndicated talk radio program on somewhere between 57 and 87 stations.² Limbaugh's program was brash, entertaining, controversial, and pushed boundaries. Prior to his national debut, this sort of programming did not exist outside of major cities. In fact, as of 1983, only fifty-nine talk radio stations existed nationwide, and the programming on many of those stations consisted of advice shows and staid interview and caller-focused programs that discussed everything from local issues to abominable snowmen. Most talk radio programming was local, and most of the stars of the industry, such as Larry King and Sally Jessie Rapheal, had left of center views, but rarely aired them.

At the time, talk radio had a negligible political impact—in locales with a strong tradition of talk programming, such as Boston, hosts might be able to affect local and statewide policy debates (especially on visceral issues, such as seat belt requirement laws). But talk radio was not a partisan force, nor did it have any national political impact. Additionally, until 1987, a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Limbaugh's average audience in 1988 was 299,000 listeners.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Determining the actual number of stations airing Limbaugh's program at a given time was difficult. Syndicators were known to inflate numbers, and the available evidence offered many different answers. Hennen remembered his station being one of the original 47 stations airing Limbaugh in 1987, whereas Tom Tradup, who picked up Limbaugh's program for WLS in Chicago in 1989, recalled being the 38th or 39th affiliate. The secondary literature got no more specific than the 57-87 station figure. Limbaugh himself claimed that the show began on 56 affiliates; Colford, *Rush Limbaugh* Story, 94; 138; Rush Limbaugh, "Ed McLaughlin, Founder of EIB," August 1, 2008, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/ed\_mclaughlin\_founder\_of\_eib">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/ed\_mclaughlin\_founder\_of\_eib</a>; Tom Tradup, Interview with Author, November 13, 2012; Scott Hennen, Interview with Author, December 18, 2012.

regulation called the Fairness Doctrine precluded opinion driven programming on controversial issues without offering an array of viewpoints during the broadcasting day.

Limbaugh turned the radio business on its head, and, in turn, nurtured a major new political player. Within a decade, the political talk format inaugurated by Limbaugh aired on over 1000 stations, and kept millions company as they commuted, worked, and shouted back at their radios. Over the course of the 1990s, the number of nationally syndicated talk shows rose dramatically and the content of talk radio programs grew increasingly political and conservative. Thus, by the early Nineties this new medium began substantially to influence national politics and public policy.

Both scholars and pundits agree on how the rest of the story goes: conservative station executives, conspiring with their Republican allies, programmed entire formats built around Limbaugh, and thousands of Limbaugh-wannabes cropped up all over the country. They transformed talk radio into an appendage of the Republican Party, using this platform to elect Republicans and advance the party's agenda. The success of talk radio bred the development of partisan and ideological cable news networks, and many hosts complemented their radio shows with primetime cable programs. This explanation makes sense, especially to liberals, as many executives from the corporations that own hundreds of stations (and the corporations' political action committees) donate to Republican candidates, and most hosts champion conservative candidates and causes.

Yet, logical though it may be, this narrative is simply incorrect. In reality, the story of how talk radio became a popular conservative format weaves together three distinct, complex tales. The first describes how talk radio became a widespread format, which saved AM radio. The second explains how talk radio became almost entirely conservative and doctrinaire after

1995, and the third details how liberal radio struggled commercially. Additionally, the notion that Republicans are puppet masters manipulating talk radio hosts, as assumed by many on the left, fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between hosts and the political party that they support. Talk radio hosts definitely aid the Republican Party. But, in many ways, talk radio actually dominates its relationship with elected Republicans. Hosts' activities and advocacy can often constrain the party, and hosts can be a thorn in the side of elected Republican leaders. In fact, talk radio hosts and establishment Republicans often have fundamentally incompatible goals.

One reason that the popular narrative about talk radio is incorrect is that scholars have not delved deeply into this topic. They have explored the broadest consequences of the development of talk radio and cable news—a society in which many live in echo chambers which reinforce their partisan and philosophical convictions, and skew their understanding of policy debates.<sup>3</sup> These echo chambers produce a more polarized political arena in which it is hard to get things done.<sup>4</sup> Early research on the topic also focused on who listened to talk radio, whether the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ample evidence exists that many Americans only consume news from ideologically like-minded sources (see, for example, Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012)). Yet, a nascent literature argues that the case for echo chambers is overstated, and that most Americans either abstain from ideological news sources, and/or receive a much more balanced news diet than previously believed. See, for example, Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice (Chicago Studies in American Politics)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), as well as the work of Michael J LaCour (<a href="http://www.mikelacour.com/media/">http://www.mikelacour.com/media/</a>)—the veracity of which has recently come into question (see Gregory J. Martin, "Comment on LaCour (2014), "The Echo Chambers are Empty,"" May 29, 2015, <a href="http://polisci.emory.edu/faculty/gjmart2/papers/lacour\_2014\_comment.pdf">http://polisci.emory.edu/faculty/gjmart2/papers/lacour\_2014\_comment.pdf</a>). See also Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126 (2011): 1799–1839, doi:10.1093/qje/qjr044. Advance Access publication on November 3, 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

medium affected electoral outcomes, especially in presidential races, and listeners' attitudes towards political figures.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, scholars have neglected the critically important impact of these new ideological media on how the political and policymaking processes operate. They have not looked into the ways in which the two parties interact with these media, or the differences in how the two parties use talk radio. Without this inquiry, scholars can only see one side of the relationship between ideological media and Republicans, skewing their understanding.

Further, few scholars have addressed the fact that talk radio is a business. Thus, they have failed to see that the need to entertain dictates much of the content and tone of talk radio.<sup>6</sup> Nor have many scholars focused on the historical development of talk radio, and the critical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See among others: David C. Barker, *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, And American Political Behavior* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)) David Barker, "Rushed Decisions, Political Talk Radio and Voter Choice, 1994-1996," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no 2 (May 1999): 532-35, Barker and Kathleen Knight, "Political Talk Radio and Public Opinion," *the Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 149-170; Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, Douglas Muzzio, "Dial in Democracy: Talk Radio and the 1994 Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 461-64; 466; 469; David A. Jones (1998) Political Talk Radio: The Limbaugh Effect on Primary Voters, *Political Communication* 15 no. 3, 367-381; R Lance Holbert, "Political Talk Radio," Perceived Fairness, and the Establishment of President George W. Bush's Political Legitimacy," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9, no. 3 (2004): 12-27; Diana Owen, Talk Radio and Evaluations of President Clinton, *Political Communication* 14, no. 3 (1997): 333-353, DOI: 10.1080/105846097199362; Barry A Hollander, "Political Talk Radio in the '90s: A Panel Study, *Journal of Radio Studies* 6, no. 2 (1999): 236-245; Barry A Hollander, "Talk radio: Predictors of Use and Effects on Attitudes about Government," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 1. (1997):102-113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M. Berry perceptively explain that all three outrage media (talk radio, cable news, and the blogosphere) are businesses, and as such, the bottom line and the desire to profit drive decision making. Yet, they don't take this next step and recognize that, at least for talk radio, entertaining, more so than informing, or articulating the views of the audience, is the goal. To a degree, this failure leads them to misinterpret the allure of outrage media, See especially Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128 & 142.

question of why it came to be dominated by conservatives. *Mount Rushmore* corrects this flaw and details how talk radio blazed a path that would later be followed by cable news and the blogosphere.

Ironically, politics did not drive the development of talk radio, even though that very same talk radio would emerge as a powerful political actor, which affected electoral politics, the policymaking process, and public policy. The medium has also contributed to a transformation of the Republican Party. Talk radio hosts have become major political figures, and, in many cases, Republican Party leaders. Additionally, talk radio became the first of a new wave of ideologically driven niche media that reshaped how Americans consume information and how they viewed journalism.

As my title suggests, *Mount Rushmore* recognizes Limbaugh's centrality to the story. His meteoric national rise was the most important catalyst in the development of talk radio during the 1990s. The combination of his success and his political views triggered some of the programming decisions that helped to transform the medium into an almost entirely conservative and political megaphone. Politically, Limbaugh had a larger impact on the national consciousness than any other host by virtue of his near universal name recognition and his ability

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> While MSNBC is as liberal as Fox News is conservative, its ratings are far weaker; A chapter of Susan Douglas' *Listening In* provides an explanation of the rise of Limbaugh, Don Imus and other similar hosts. Yet, Douglas misinterprets the disjunction within talk radio represented by Limbaugh's rise nationally. She fails to see how different his style was from the dominant brand of milquetoast talk programming that existed before 1988; Several scholars, including Jeffrey Berry, Sarah Sobieraj, and William Mayer have refuted the idea that political bias explains the imbalance between conservatives and liberals in talk radio. Yet, none of them offer a comprehensive exploration (or explanation) of why liberal radio largely has failed commercially. Elements of the explanation are found in these works, but others are missing. Berry and Sobieraj capably depict the second half of talk radio's rise during the 2000s, but their portrayal does not offer much on the first half of this process, during which most of the transformation (if not the growth) occurred; See William G Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative," *Public Interest* 156: 86-103; Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, ""Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, no. 44 (October 2011): 762-767, doi:10.1017/S1049096511001223; Susan, Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 283-318; Berry and Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry*.

to create news. Furthermore, his audience, by far the largest in talk radio at roughly 14 million listeners per week,8 enabled him to be a true force in politics and in the broader media constellation.

Limbaugh is a highly divisive figure—a hero to some who view him as a champion for their beliefs, and a villain to others, who loathe his views, his style, and his impact on society. Yet, he is unquestionably a broadcasting visionary who revolutionized an entire medium. He belongs in the pantheon of such innovators alongside legendary figures such as Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, Tim Russert, David Lettermen, Jon Stewart, and sportscaster John Madden. Regardless of how one judges his contributions to politics, public policy, broadcasting, and punditry, scholars should recognize the magnitude of his impact and strive to better understand it.

#### The Rise of Talk Radio

If one was trying to identify the next political media star in 1984, odds were that Limbaugh would not have been in the running. He dropped out of college, failed to register to vote in the thirteen years during which he had been eligible, and had gotten fired four times as a radio disc jockey (using pseudonyms like Jeff Christy and Rusty Sharpe—years later some of the executives who fired him had no recollection of Christy, even when informed that they had actually fired Rush Limbaugh). After a five year stint in group sales and special events for the Kansas City Royals, Limbaugh landed a job reading the news for Kansas City station KMBZ. Limbaugh upset station management by adding commentary to the news, and allowing his beliefs (instilled by his father—who would have watched Fox News if it existed in the 1960s and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Limbaugh's audience ebbs and flows, but for more than two decades he has consistently had the largest audience in talk radio.

1970s) to affect story choices. Station management planned to fire Limbaugh, but consultant Bill McMahon asked to speak with him first, because he knew that management often fired the most talented people. McMahon recognized Limbaugh's ability and offered to get him a slot doing commentary, in exchange for reading the news straight. Limbaugh took the deal, and his short commentaries provoked massive feedback. Initially, the feedback was negative, but over time it became more mixed—people either loved or hated Limbaugh. Management liked the attention that he drew, and gave him his own talk program.

But some of Limbaugh's commentary ended up being too controversial for his bosses (Bonneville, the radio arm of the Mormon Church, owned KMBZ). For example, he reasonably critiqued a shopping development for going more upscale by replacing traditional Middle America shops with tonier establishments. Yet, because Limbaugh viewed the change as a swipe at average people, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, he also suggested that the center just prohibit ugly people. Amidst listener complaints, management chastened him. Most importantly, Limbaugh criticized Kansas City Chiefs management, including Team President Jack Steadman, at precisely the moment when the station was pursuing the Chiefs' radio contract. Steadman complained to station manager Paul Leonard. Leonard saw the incident as the last straw for Limbaugh, and fired him.

By luck, McMahon's business partner Norm Woodruff programmed KFBK in Sacramento. KFBK had to replace Morton Downey, whose racist tirades cost him his job. Woodruff told Limbaugh that the station welcomed controversy and would support him so long as he treated callers politely and believed what he said. Limbaugh spent four years in Sacramento honing the program that would propel him to stardom. In 1988, former KFBK consultant Bruce Marr, who believed that Limbaugh possessed the ability to reach through the radio and grab

people, suggested to former ABC Radio President Ed McLaughlin that Limbaugh had star written all over him. McLaughlin disagreed upon an initial listen in a hotel room, but he gave Limbaugh a second chance. While listening in the car, he felt a direct connection between Limbaugh and the listeners. He liked the topical ideas, strong viewpoints, and show biz elements of Limbaugh's show, and cut a deal to take him national.<sup>9</sup>

Limbaugh emerged nationally in a malleable moment in which radio executives were desperately searching for programming to save AM radio. AM had declined for several decades as music migrated to FM signals (where it sounded better), taking listeners and advertising dollars with it. Simultaneously, a segment of the population felt alienated by cultural and media trends, and yearned for someone who might express their views. These Americans felt maligned and disrespected by the mainstream media, and they objected to the media's story selection, cultural perspective, and editorial decisions. Additionally, legal and technological developments, including repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, easing and eventual removal of limits on how many radio stations a single owner could possess, the development of mobile phones, and advances in cheap satellite technology opened the door for a new brand of in your face, conservative, nationally syndicated, political talk radio.

Nonetheless, Limbaugh's importance cannot be understated. Without Limbaugh, talk radio's development path would have been radically different. It is certainly conceivable that the medium would not have developed at all, or that it might not have become a conservative or political medium.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Bill McMahon, Interview With Author, January 23, 2013; Paul D. Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God an Unauthorized Biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 50-84; "Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series, The First Annual Radio Festival: Rush Limbaugh and the Talk Radio Revolution," October 24, 1995, Catalog number T:40932, accessed at the Paley Center's New York branch; Bruce Marr, Interview with Author, October 11, 2014; Tyler Cox, Interview With Author, October 24, 2014.

Indeed, prior to Limbaugh's arrival on the national stage, the paradigmatic talk radio programs emulated Larry King's national interview program. Locally, Los Angeles' famed Michael Jackson was one of the biggest stars, and offered a cerebral program, which was more akin to what is heard today on National Public Radio (NPR) (for example, Diane Rehm, On Point, Fresh Air, etc) than most contemporary conservative talk programs. Hosts rarely aired their perspective. Acerbic and entertaining New York star Bob Grant (famous for bellowing at callers to get off his phone), and his ilk were exceptions before Limbaugh's emergence, existing only in some major markets.

Limbaugh fused the conservative perspective driven format of Grant and Joe Pyne (who told callers to gargle with razor blades) with the stylings and sensibility of a rock music radio disc jockey. Additionally, unlike Grant and Pyne, he was unfailingly polite to listeners. More importantly, unlike those caustic commentators, Limbaugh had fun on the air—often using parodies, sound effects, absurdity, and sarcasm to get his message across.

Radio programmers misunderstood how integral this entertaining and unique style was to Limbaugh's early success. His show became appointment listening for many, not because of his message, but because he entertained them. Programmers, however, attributed his success to his conservatism. In reality, his ideology attracted a particular segment of his audience that thirsted to hear their perspective echoed in the media. Yet, in his early national days, Limbaugh also attracted many liberal and moderate listeners, who laughed in spite of themselves.<sup>10</sup>

In 1991, Limbaugh broadcast a satirical trailer (set to old fashioned Hollywood theme music) for a mini-series entitled "Gulf War Won," that illustrated his unique combination of zany

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Several programmers whose stations broadcast Limbaugh's show in the early days evaluated his audience, either through focus groups or other methods. This research indicated that liberals constituted a significant slice of his audience; George Oliva, Interview With Author, November 26, 2012; Valerie Geller, Interview With Author, January 14, 2013.

entertainment and political messaging (and why he appealed to both audiences). Many of the celebrities chosen for roles in the mini-series physically (and humorously) resembled the public figures who Limbaugh assigned them to play. For example, Limbaugh cast James Earl Jones as General Colin Powell, Betty White as First Lady Barbara Bush, and Ringo Starr as Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat.

Humorous though they were, many casting decisions also implicitly reflected Limbaugh's political slant—he chose suave, tough, manly actors to play major Republicans and conservatives. For example, Clint Eastwood portrayed President Bush and Arnold Schwarzenegger portrayed conservative hero Colonial Oliver North. Additionally, the mini-series reflected traditional gender roles; it contained a pre-credit sequence set in 1940 that Limbaugh vividly described for listeners. This pre-credit sequence included a man having his way with his wife (and angrily throwing aside a condom that she asked him to use stamped "Provided by New York City School System"). Liberals and mainstream media personalities also fared poorly. Senator Ted Kennedy portrayed "the luckiest man in Iraq because he knew what it was like to cross a bridge bombed (in reference to the fatal accident at Chappaquiddick)." Limbaugh assigned Star Wars character Jabba the Hut the role of National Organization of Women President Molly Yard, and ET the extra-terrestrial the role of House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt. Puppet Howdy Doody, Whoopi Goldberg, and Jack Nicholson as the Joker portrayed prominent journalists Ted Koppel, Bernard Shaw, and Peter Arnett respectively.

The miniseries also rejected liberal ideas and groups—Martin Sheen portrayed an antiwar activist who lost the lower half of his body trying to prevent the launching of a Patriot missile, and the San Francisco Chapter of "Dykes on Bikes" played the "all American First Cavalry Amazon Battalion" whose mission consisted of "taking out all future members of the

Iraqi Republican guard who were being maternally protected in intra-uterun bunkers." Finally, Limbaugh himself portrayed heroic General H. Norman Schwarzkopf (who did resemble the host), attractive actress Bo Derek portrayed Schwarzkopf's wife, and Sylvester Stallone drew the role of Limbaugh himself. Nonetheless, many of the casting decisions would have made a listener from any political persuasion laugh, and the mini-series epitomized the sort of fun that Limbaugh had in his early days—listeners could never be quite sure what would come next.<sup>11</sup>

Understanding that Limbaugh's ability to entertain contributed significantly to his early success provides insight into why no liberal Limbaugh emerged over the last twenty-seven years. Liberal radio has failed commercially, not because of its political slant, but rather, due to the inability of many hosts to entertain. Many attempts at building liberal radio involved importing hosts from politics or entertainment. Yet, most of the best talk radio hosts, like Limbaugh, were career broadcasters with long histories in radio. They understood that talk radio must prioritize entertainment above all, and that entertaining radio required a different style from entertaining in other venues. The best talk radio was fast paced, conversational, spontaneous, unpredictable, edgy and pushed boundaries.

As talk radio became more conservative during the 1990s (spurred both by the success of Limbaugh and the first explicitly branded conservative talk stations, *and* by the failure of several much hyped liberal talk programs), the potential audience for liberal talk fled to other media, including NPR. Thus, several early 2000s ambitious efforts to build liberal radio faced an uphill climb because their target audience no longer listened to AM talk radio. Luring this audience

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "The Gulf War Retrospective," January 16, 1992, Paley Center Catalog Number R:8373, <a href="http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=the+day+after+&p=8&item=R:8373">http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=the+day+after+&p=8&item=R:8373</a>, accessed at the Paley Center's New York branch.

back to AM radio would be difficult because NPR served it well, providing the nuanced exploration of issues (guided by liberal sensibilities) that the audience sought.

Several aspects of liberal thinking proved to be a poor fit for talk radio. Liberals' reluctance to offended made it more difficult for liberal hosts to employ the sort of edgy humor and boundary pushing style that made Limbaugh and other conservative hosts so successful. Additionally, the complexity and nuance of liberal arguments made them difficult to explain in the sort of digestible soundbites that conservative hosts utilized. These ideas often came off as wishy-washy on the radio. Finally, many liberal grievances tended to focus on societal ills, which led to impersonal policy discussions. By contrast, the most engaging talk radio was emotional and deeply personal. Given the uphill climb that liberal radio faced in the 2000s, it needed substantial help from the political left, which was never forthcoming, because of a lack of coordination and unity on the left.<sup>12</sup>

Many within the radio industry and even some scholars mistakenly cling to the notion that widespread bias and structural disadvantages, such as low wattage stations and small promotional budgets, explained the ideological disparity in talk radio. Bias existed, especially, ironically, before highly leveraged, massive conglomerates took over radio in the mid to late 1990s. Indeed, some mom and pop station owners did program based upon their beliefs—but this happened with both liberal and conservative owners, and it was never a major factor in the format's content writ large. Further, Limbaugh overcame many of the structural deficits that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> One must separate the struggles of liberal radio from the failure of the much ballyhooed early 2000s Air America network. Air America suffered from many flaws specific to the network, as will be detailed in chapter two. While Air America's failure damaged liberal radio writ large, its failure did not reflect the failings of the broader format.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bill Press, *Toxic Talk: How the Radical Right Has Poisoned America's Airwaves* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 245-249; Eric Klineberg, *Fighting For Air* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 76-79.

hampered liberal radio, indicating that had the liberal talk product been better, it too could have overcome them.

Overall, today's political talk radio landscape clearly favors conservatives and nationally syndicated programs. Yet, this uniform programming does not reflect a hidden political agenda. Most radio executives made (and make) decisions based upon what they believed to offer the best route to profit. In fact, some of the programmers who helped to construct the conservative talk empire were card carrying Democrats who saw a gap in the market and tried to fill it. Further, leading politicians from both parties ignored the medium until it became a sufficiently significant factor politically to demand their attention. Even the legal decisions that contributed to the uniformly conservative and predominately syndicated nature of political talk stemmed from philosophical conservatism, not partisan political calculation. Conservative regulators and elected officials had no inkling that their decisions might spawn a political colossus that would benefit their party.

For example, the 1996 Telecommunications Act removed the national limits on how many stations one entity could own, and set off a frenetic period of consolidation. When the smoke cleared, conglomerates owned hundreds of stations. They vertically integrated by building syndication operations that produced many conservative talk programs that their stations then broadcast across the country. This structure often left all but the largest markets with local programming only in morning drive time, and otherwise provided the same shows in every market. Yet, many members of Congress and staffers from both parties had not foreseen dramatic consolidation as a consequence of the removal of national ownership caps, let alone the medium's eventual conservative slant and focus on national politics.

One can safely assume that President Clinton would not have signed the

Telecommunications Act if he had expected it to create a business model in which iHeartMedia<sup>14</sup>
would eventually own 850 stations, and program many of them with a local conservative
morning host, followed by Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity for nine hours.
iHeartMedia owned Premiere Radio which syndicated the programs of Beck, Limbaugh and
Hannity, and all three dedicated their programs to bashing Democrats like Clinton. After the
Telecommunications Act passed, Wall Street saw an industry that produced good cash flow and
had been artificially limited, and rushed to invest. The move to syndicated talk made sense once
companies owned hundreds of stations. It brought top quality talent to smaller markets, and it
significantly reduced costs for the newly debt laden conglomerates that had spent billions
absorbing competitors.

#### **Talk Radio's Political Impact**

Talk radio *has* profoundly affected politics over the last twenty years. The events of January 12 and 13, 2009 offered, perhaps, the clearest example of its political importance. On January 12, Limbaugh forgot to inform listeners that he would miss a show to lunch with President Bush at the White House. By coincidence, Limbaugh also played a clip of President-elect Barrack Obama saying that he was open to any idea that worked. Limbaugh offered to meet with Obama at any time, anywhere, on a moment's notice. The next day, Limbaugh lunched privately with President Bush. Bush's staff had arranged for a birthday cake for the host complete with candles and a chocolate microphone. The President also invited Limbaugh to join dignitaries for the Medal of Freedom ceremony. When Limbaugh realized that he forgot to mention that he would be absent, he instructed substitute host Jason Lewis to have fun with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Formerly Clear Channel

audience by replaying the Obama clip and noting that he [Lewis] had been summoned late in the day on Monday because Limbaugh would be absent on Tuesday. Coincidentally, while Limbaugh flew home, the press discovered that Obama would be having dinner with a group prominent conservative journalists. Instantly, Limbaugh started receiving emails (including from friends) wondering if he was meeting with the president-elect. Thus, Limbaugh had assumed such significant political stature that simultaneously the president invited him for a birthday lunch, and many found it plausible that the president-elect, from the opposite party, might be meeting with him.

How did talk radio achieve this level of political importance? Talk radio was the first of an array of media that allowed politicians to speak directly to voters without the filter of a journalist deciding whether their messaging was newsworthy, or if it was, how best to frame it for the public. Today, such communication is common place. Politicians can choose between media like talk radio or cable news, where they have to contend with a (usually sympathetic) interviewer, or platforms like Facebook and Youtube, where they can speak to voters unfiltered. Yet, at the time that talk radio took off, only one cable news station (CNN) existed, and the three broadcast networks and major newspapers still dominated the news.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Rush Upstages Obama's Dinner with Washingtonian Republicans," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, January 14, 2009, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/01/14/rush\_upstages\_obama\_s\_dinner\_with\_washingtonian\_republicans; Trey Bohn, Interview With Author, October 31, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Of course, prior to the rise of talk radio, politicians could speak directly to voters through paid advertisements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The findings of Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Cristian Vaccari suggest that although, theoretically, social media like Facebook and Youtube offer politicians the opportunity to speak directly to voters, the vast majority of politicians actually reach exceptionally small percentages of the electorate through these outlets. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Christian Vaccari, "Do People 'Like' Candidates on Facebook?—from direct to indirect and institutional effects of social media in politics," Paper presented at the American Political Science Association 2011 conference at the 40-1 Information Technology and Politics panel on US Elections from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Manuscript under review;" See also the subsequent version of this paper Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Christian Vaccari, "Do People Like Candidates on Facebook? Not Really. Large-Scale Direct Candidate-to-Voter Online Communication as an Outlier Phenomenon," *The International Journal of Communications*, 7 (2013), <a href="http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1717/1014">http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1717/1014</a>.

Their unique medium also allowed talk radio hosts to assume a new type of party leadership role — the ultimate "outsider." As the power of appointed and elected party leaders decreased over the last few decades, such outsiders, from the ranks interest groups, grassroots movements, and the media increasingly filled the leadership role in both parties. Many observers misunderstood this transfer of power to represent the weakening of political parties. Yet, in reality, when conceived of broadly as coalitions of activists, interest groups, elected officials, and the like-minded, parties were actually quite robust. The new type of party leader wielded power without an official leadership role, or even, in some cases, an expressed desire to exercise control over the party. They also prioritized the achievement of their preferred public policy goals over the party's electoral success, and utilized primary elections to build a party that would advocate for their desired policies.

Curiously, even scholars who documented this transition towards grassroots parties did not include media personalities among the new outsider party leaders. Yet, in reality, talk radio hosts were among the most powerful of these leaders because their platform allowed them to communicate intimately with millions of voters (for national hosts) on a daily basis. For many listeners, hosts were trusted friends—people with similar sensibilities with whom they spent hours per day (some people spent more time per day with their favorite hosts than with their spouses). This unique bond allowed hosts to rally listeners behind causes or candidates. Listeners responded to hosts' exhortations as they would respond if a friend or family member discussed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Even scholars who continued to view parties as vehicles through which ambitious politicians could achieve their electoral goals now view parties as coalitions; See Seth E. Masket, *No Middle Ground How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2009); Marty Cohen, et. al., *The Party Decides Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008; Kathleen Bawn, Et. al., "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3. (September 2012): 571; John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), see especially 286-292.

an issue or candidate with them (as opposed to the way in which they would react if a journalist wrote about a race).

Like traditional party leaders, hosts supported Republican candidates and the Republican agenda through traditional methods, like fundraising, and by using their unique platform to convey a message or trumpet a candidate. They communicated regularly with elected Republican leaders and their staff. On some days during the George W. Bush administration, hosts could receive communications from House and Senate Republicans, the Bush White House, the Republican National Committee, and individual members of Congress. Hosts offered elected Republicans a platform through which they could disseminate their message, and a feedback loop through which they could gauge the opinions of their base. Especially as talk radio became more conservative, it allowed Republicans to segment the electorate, and narrowcast a message to their base. Talk radio also provided an avenue to get controversial and sometimes dubiously sourced stories into the news that reporters might not otherwise choose to cover. Finally, in moments of crisis, talk radio provided Republicans with an outlet to reach the constituents whose support they could not afford to lose.

Hosts also provided more durable party building leadership. Scholars Kathleen Hall

Jamieson and Joseph Cappella explained that "these conservative media [the conservative media establishment consisting of Rush Limbaugh, the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News] create a self-protective enclave hospitable to conservative beliefs. This safe haven... reinforces conservative values and dispositions, holds Republicans candidates and leaders accountable to conservative ideals, tightens their audience's ties to the Republican Party, and distances [their audience] from 'liberals,' in general, and Democrats, in particular." This

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, Echo Chamber, X.

establishment should be broadened to include all conservative talk radio hosts and major conservative bloggers, who also performed many of the functions outlined by Jamieson and Cappella.

In addition, hosts provided a message that bridged any potential divide between blue collar conservatives and wealthier suburban Republicans, which helped to sustain the Republican coalition. Blue collar listeners appreciated hosts' respectful treatment because they felt scorned by a liberal establishment. Hosts also appealed to these listeners by advocating cultural conservatism, and utilizing culturally conservative tropes. They simultaneously appealed to suburban and business conservatives through an unrelenting push for lower taxes and less regulation of business.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, as Jamieson and Cappella explained, the message offered by talk radio made listeners more suspicious of claims that could be potentially harmful to Republicans, and thus less open to counter persuasion, especially from the mainstream media.

This rhetorical leadership especially benefitted Republicans during election campaigns. When political events motivated conservatives, talk radio hosts could channel their sentiments into specific campaigns. Alternatively, when hosts and listeners might be frustrated with Republicans, hosts framed campaigns in such a way as to give listeners a reason to remain loyal. They voiced listeners' frustrations, but they also explained why Republicans were still the best option and why listeners should make sure to vote.

#### **No Relationship Is Perfect**

Yet, while, on balance, talk radio advantaged Republicans, hosts could be a thorn in the side of elected Republicans who were trying to legislate, and to build the largest majority

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Jamieson and Cappella write, "where both Fox and Limbaugh attract an audience tilted toward economically anxious middle-class males from churchgoing households and southerners, the *Journal* addresses the party's business base;" Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, xii; I contend, however, that the rhetoric of talk radio also appealed to the business base as well.

possible. Unlike traditional party leaders, hosts fiercely protected their independence and always prioritized producing the best radio over all other goals. If that meant rejecting entreaties from Republicans to discuss a boring topic, hosts opted for entertainment value over party loyalty. If it meant criticizing elected Republicans to maintain their authenticity, hosts bashed away. Further, hosts frequently discussed Democratic and liberal scandals, including many that were weakly sourced or outlandish. Talk radio listeners cared passionately about these stories, which made for good radio and even better ratings. Yet, when hosts worked their callers into a lather about a "scandal" they forced elected Republicans to address it. When Republicans aggressively pursued these scandals, they could turn off moderate and independent voters, and this pursuit might well prevent them from achieving legislative goals in a divided government.

Hosts did not mind this outcome because they prioritized their ideological predilections and husbanded their authenticity over fealty to the party. As such, they often harshly criticized the very sort of deal making that was necessary to legislate in contested policy areas.

Additionally, over the last decade, hosts became increasingly intolerant of moderate Republicans. Until roughly 2005, many hosts supported moderate Republicans when they were the most conservative candidates that could win. Subsequently, however, many hosts began supporting primary challenges to these moderates. As the type of voter most likely to vote in a low turnout congressional primary was also the same type of politically engaged, ideologically driven person who listened to talk radio, hosts wielded the capacity to hurt moderates who crossed them.

Hosts' ability to boost the fundraising and name recognition of an insurgent candidate, which negated two of the key benefits of incumbency, augmented their power. As a result, hosts' war on

moderates contributed to the demise of the remaining liberal and moderate Republicans in Congress—either voluntarily or by defeat.<sup>21</sup>

More often than not, talk radio hosts never had to actually deploy this weapon. What mattered most was that elected Republicans believed that this power existed. This perception forced more pragmatic, deal cutting conservatives to the right, and made it harder for them to engineer compromise legislation. While moderates could at least use an electability argument in a primary election in a left-leaning place, pragmatic conservatives faced substantial risk of primary defeat in their deep red districts/states if voters deemed them insufficiently conservative. Indeed, precisely because they valued entertainment over party loyalty, hosts often resorted to incendiary presentations, hyperbole, and what Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj defined as outrage—sarcasm, insults, etc. This demonization of the opposition made it far harder for Republicans to compromise, even when divided government demanded such compromises, because talkers encouraged the mantra that bipartisan compromise was a fireable offense. Brian Fitzpatrick, a former staffer for moderate Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY), recalled a high school classmate who would get red faced and could barely speak whenever he saw Fitzpatrick because he listened to Limbaugh, who left him incensed about some of the votes that Houghton cast.22

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The minimal scholarly literature on the demise of moderate Republicans, like the literature on the rise of conservatism, understandably focused on an earlier period. Nonetheless, a significant, durable core of moderate Republicans still existed when Limbaugh debuted nationally in 1988; See Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012); Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, Interview With Author, August 29, 2013.

Thus, talk radio contributed to the polarization of elected officials, which in divided government<sup>23</sup>, produced gridlock. Talk radio also helped to democratize Congress, which also made action more difficult. In previous eras it was difficult for a congressional backbencher to draw attention to him/herself and his or her ideas. By contrast, today, scores of ambitious and ideologically driven junior members utilize outrage media [talk radio, cable news, and the blogosphere] and social media to make a name for themselves, or even achieve celebrity, and to draw attention to their ideas. When junior members, such as Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), proposed an idea that his leadership disliked, his ideological allies on talk radio ran with it, building support among his conservative base. This sequence could in turn force the Republican leadership into action, or reduce their flexibility to compromise.

#### **Democrats and Talk Radio: A Missed Opportunity**

Ironically, given the medium's reputation as a bastion of conservatism, Bill Clinton was the first high profile elected official to truly grasp the political potential of talk radio. Conversely, congressional Democrats reacted sluggishly to the new medium. Yet, after 1995, congressional Democrats actually constructed similar outreach infrastructure to that created by Republicans for communicating with talk radio, and during the mid to late 1990s, aggressively engaged with the medium. Rank and file Democrats, however, never bought in to the degree that rank and file Republicans did. The medium simply never had the same cultural importance for Democrats as it did for Republicans. As a result, these efforts never had the same priority that Republicans placed on their outreach, and declined with time as Democrats soured on the medium because hosts regularly used them as piñatas. By largely vacating the playing field, Democrats sacrificed an opportunity to expose talk radio listeners to their message (which would have appealed to many

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Or unified government unless the majority party held at least sixty Senate seats to overcome a filibuster by the minority.

listeners on one issue or another). Additionally, appearing in greater numbers on talk radio likely would have reduced the personal vitriol directed at Democrats. Those Democrats who frequently appeared on talk radio faced spirited debate, but found that hosts treated them respectfully and often, praised their character and any issue positions with which the host agreed.

#### **Talk Radio's Impact On Public Policy**

Hosts could also use their unique bond with listeners to stop policy proposals in their tracks. Angry listeners could shut down the congressional switchboard after hosts railed about legislation. This potential could lead to the decision that tackling a smaller bill opposed by talk radio was not worth the political costs. Additionally, it could make bipartisan action impossible on a big issue, such as immigration reform. Recent scholarship demonstrated that ideological media affected the audience's perceptions of legislation,<sup>24</sup> which could make supporting legislation that hosts disliked politically impossible, especially for Republicans.

Talk radio's power in the legislative process was mostly negative. It could kill legislation, but rarely could it generate sufficient support to force an idea into federal law. Nonetheless, when Republicans controlled Congress, they operated in an environment in which the major electoral concern came from primary elections, which provided talk radio with a powerful megaphone to push for more conservative forms of legislation. The specter of talk radio opposition could also contribute to the Republican leadership deciding not to allow a vote on a bill, even if the majority of members supported it.

#### Talk Radio, Cable News, and the Blogosphere

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Matthew A. Blum, "Partisan Media and Attitude Polarization: The Case of Healthcare Reform," in *Regulatory Breakdown: The Crisis of Confidence in U.S. Regulation* ed. Cary Coglianese (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 118-142; Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarizes America*.

In a real sense talk radio was the pioneer that paved the way for cable news, and to a degree, the blogosphere. Rush Limbaugh and the initial, successful, all conservative talk stations demonstrated the potential profit from a conservative broadcast medium before Fox News launched in 1996. Talk radio also provided a template for a successful conservative infotainment outlet that Fox News and conservative blogs largely replicated. This template included boldly stated, unambiguous conservative analysis and positions that challenged mainstream news coverage. Although discussion often covered apolitical topics, a conservative worldview and cultural conservatism consistently guided the conversation. This template also called for covering issues important to conservatives that other media outlets ignored. Finally, this model dictated providing a place in which conservatives won the political debates.

Although this project does not focus on cable news and the blogosphere, the phenomena discussed in the following chapters apply to those media as well. In fact, the three "new" media were deeply interrelated, beyond the template provided by talk radio. Limbaugh and Fox News visionary Roger Ailes, who produced Limbaugh's television program between 1992 and 1996, were friends. Additionally, leading Fox News hosts Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly hosted talk radio programs that allowed them to craft the message communicated later in the day on their television shows. At the end of his radio program each day, Hannity previewed the night's television show for listeners. Many talk radio hosts, left and right, including Mike Gallagher, Leslie Marshall, and Laura Ingraham, made regular Fox News appearances, and often guest hosted on the network. Similarly, many hosts wrote columns for conservative internet sites, and some bloggers, such as Erick Erickson, began hosting radio shows. In its infancy, Fox News even paid Limbaugh to read promos for the network touting its "balanced" perspective and implying that the competition was biased.

This synergy paradoxically both increased and decreased the political potency and importance of talk radio as the 2000s progressed. On the one hand, talk radio was no longer the sole ideological mass medium. Nor was it the sole medium through which politicians could reach voters directly with a message, as it was until 1996. Conversely, however, the synergy between talk radio, cable news, and the blogosphere actually created an even bigger and more powerful megaphone when all three were in concert on an issue or candidate, as they usually were. Additionally, blogs served as a source of realtime information for hosts, who often surfed the internet before their shows and during commercial breaks. If the Drudge Report broke a story during Limbaugh's program, he could share it with his listeners within minutes.

#### **Methodology and Layout**

Talk radio poses real methodological quandaries for scholars. It is difficult to impossible to access old talk radio programs, especially those dating back before 2005. Especially for the period before widespread internet archiving, scholars who wanted to consider the topic really only had newspaper quotes from talk radio, as well as the radio programs that they might listen to (or record) during their research period as sources. These research difficulties may explain why scholars have done more research on the political impact of the internet and cable news, whose content is better preserved and more easily accessed, than on talk radio.

Mount Rushmore aims to overcome these methodological hurdles. It relies on archived programs from all available sources, including privately held recordings, recordings from C-SPAN, and the recordings made by the Library of Congress' talk radio archive, which began in 2005, and subsequently recorded roughly one talk radio program per week. Mount Rushmore also employs archived transcripts of hosts' television shows and appearances that conveyed the same themes that they discussed on the radio. Similarly, I utilize newspaper articles that quote

hosts or discuss their coverage of events, and several years of *Talkers Magazine*, an industry trade publication. I've supplemented this documentary evidence by conducting more than two hundred and twenty-five interviews with subjects who were involved in every facet of the political world and the radio business. When possible, these interviews took place on the record. In cases where a subject asked to discuss something on background, I agreed to omit a footnote citing the interview or to obscure the identity of the subject.

In many cases this methodology required choosing case studies based upon available material, as opposed to selecting them in order to examine the political impact of talk radio in a certain historical moment. Nonetheless, I am confident that this mix of sources presents a comprehensive and accurate picture of the development of talk radio, as well as its impact on politics and public policy over the last twenty-six years.

A note on related media not covered in depth in this dissertation, which include National Public Radio, Hispanic radio, African American radio, cable news, and the blogosphere. All are important, and their exclusion stems solely from trying to keep the project manageable and focused.

The chapters proceed as follows: the first section focuses on the development of the radio industry. The prologue briefly explores the deeper historical roots of modern talk radio—what was talk radio like before 1988, and how was Rush Limbaugh's program different from his predecessors' shows? Chapter one argues that executives' political beliefs had little to do with the programming that aired on talk radio. It explains why talk radio became a major radio format after 1988, and then explores the business and regulatory factors that drove the medium to become almost universally political and conservative after the mid-1990s. Chapter two explores why liberal radio has largely failed commercially and looks at the respective support that

ideologically aligned interest groups and organizations provided to conservative and liberal radio.

The second section details the interaction between political actors and talk radio, and the medium's impact on electoral politics. Chapter three argues that talk radio hosts have become Republican Party leaders and explores the contours of their leadership. Chapter four details the contribution of talk radio to the increasing conservatism of the Republican Party, assesses the impact of talk radio on moderate Republicans, and explains why primary elections were the electoral arena in which talk radio had the most impact. Chapter five looks at Democratic outreach to talk radio, and examines the consequences of its mixed track record. Finally, the last section/chapter explores the impact of talk radio on public policy and the policymaking process. The epilogue provides a brief look at the interaction among talk radio, cable news, and the blogosphere, and explains why much of the analysis in this dissertation applies to the other new media as well.

## The Man Who Changed Radio

Rush Limbaugh inaugurated the modern talk radio era in 1988 when he nationally pioneered a style of radio that had previously only been available in a few big markets. This new format actually fused together three types of radio with long histories. Limbaugh's sound combined interactive talk radio, which dated back to the 1940s or 1950s, the explicit advocacy and conservative ideology of hosts such as Dan Smoot and Clarence Manion, 25 and the fun

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> See Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression (New York, Vintage Books, 1982), Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), and Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010, for the history of conservative radio.

stylings and sensibilities of rock music radio. He built a unique show by expressing his opinions in a colorful and entertaining manner, and in doing so, changed the direction of spoken word radio.

In 1960 radio executive Ben Hoberman changed the programming format at KABC in Los Angeles from music to talk, making it the nation's first all-talk radio station<sup>26</sup> Stations in Los Angeles broadcast every imaginable music format, and Hoberman believed that survival required KABC to do something totally different. He created an all talk format that featured one hour programs hosted by experts on finance, entertainment, sports, and news.<sup>27</sup> By 1963, KABC had two call in shows occupying six and a half hours per day to complement news and expert conversation.<sup>28</sup> Hoberman did not provide an opportunity for his hosts to offer their individual philosophies (though Joe Pyne's perspective clearly shined through as he took calls).<sup>29</sup>

Talk radio grew quickly in Los Angeles. By 1964, two other stations joined KABC in having evening call in shows. By 1967, Los Angeles had three talk stations, one of which,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Deciphering the origins of talk radio is nearly impossible given that much depends on definition—was the first talk radio program the first spoken word program, the first program that included interviews, the first spoken word program that took requests and questions from an audience, etc. A 1963 *Los Angeles Times* article claimed, "no one is positive how or where the phone-radio phenomenon began." Similarly, there were disputes as to which station inaugurated the all talk format. The best evidence indicates that spoken word programming dated back to the 1920s and 1930s, interactive talk programs appear to have begun in the years after World War II, and call-in shows dated to the 1960s; At that time that KABC's format changed, a few talk programs existed in other markets, but no station broadcast wall to wall talk programs; Don Page, "Radio Too Talky? It's Debatable," The Los Angeles Times, October 25, 1964, B1, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers; George Green, Interview With Author, February 14, 2013. Paul D. Colford, The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan From God (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), 139-142. See also Peter Laufer, Inside Talk Radio: America's Voice or Just Hot Air (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), 38-44 for a different account. See Wayne Munson, All Talk: The Talkshow in the Media Culture (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1993), for a deeper exploration of the history of spoken word programming.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ben Hoberman, Interview With Author, February 8, 2013; George Green, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Virginia West, "KABC Will Bring Back Radio Drama," The Los Angeles Times, August 23, 1963, D11, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ben Hoberman, Interview With Author.

KLAC, was the top rated station.<sup>30</sup> During the 1960s, KABC expanded its cumulative audience and advertising base. But the station did not truly take off until it acquired the rights to broadcast the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1974. Overnight KABC's ratings spiked and the station attracted a younger audience, which, in turn, attracted more advertisers. Under, Hoberman, who remained the station manager until 1979, and George Green, his sales manager and successor, the station's successful formula remained the same until 1996.<sup>31</sup> Sprawling Los Angeles, with its perpetually clogged freeways, might have been ideal for the development of a medium that kept people company in their cars.

Many of KABC's hosts became community institutions. In 1966, Michael Jackson, who became KABC's biggest star, began a thirty-three year run at the station. A year later, Ray Briem joined the station to broadcast overnights, which he would do for the next twenty-seven years, and in 1973, the morning duo of Ken Minyard and Bob Arthur began a seventeen year partnership.<sup>32</sup>

Other talk stations cropped up around the country during the 1960s, including KGO in San Francisco, which featured news during drive time, and talk for the rest of the day. KGO featured a similar format to KABC—rational and conversational talk, with only one slightly more controversial host, and hosts from all political persuasions. When Mickey Luckoff became General Manager in 1975, he brashly told the corporate lawyer heading the division for ABC that he needed 1 million dollars to take the station to number one. After a prolonged pause, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Don Page, "Radio Too Talky? It's Debatable," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1964, B1, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers; Myron Roberts, "Yackity Yack About Radio Talk Shows," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 2nd, 1967, C7, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Hoberman, Interview With Author; Green, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Don Page, "More Changes At KABC," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1973, O74, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers; See also, KABC Archives, "On Air Line-Up Early '70s," http://oceanpark.com/webmuseum/2007/kabc\_retro\_01.html.

lawyer acceded, and KGO ended up occupying the top spot in the ratings for a whopping twenty-seven years, from 1983 to 2010.

Although talk radio grew during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, the number of all talk stations only increased from two in 1960 to fifty-nine in 1983.<sup>33</sup> Most talk programs aired late at night as a way for music stations to fulfill the FCC's requirement that they air public interest programming.<sup>34</sup> According to Barry Farber, a star New York host in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, talk radio was a radio ghetto—outside of WOR, no mainstream 50,000 watt station in New York would air talk radio before 10 PM. WOR had more talk programming, but the lineup included shows about books, animals, cooking, and some music.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Frank Ahrens, "Chat to The Future; Can Talk Radio Change With The Times? There's No Telling, *The Washington* Post, February 2, 1999, C1; Bolce, DeMaio, Muzzio, "Dial In Democracy, 459; There is a dispute as to how many talk stations existed in the early to mid-1980s; The number cited in the text from Ahrens' article and credited to radio consultant Walter Sabo is most likely to be correct given the number of talk stations in subsequent periods. Nonetheless, a 1995 Nation article claimed that there were 300 all talk stations in 1985, while a 1995 Time piece placed that number at 200 stations. In Listening In, Susan Douglas noted that there were 238 such stations in 1987. While these numbers would indicate that the rapid increase in the number of talk stations occurred earlier than is usually assumed, the disagreement may simply stem from different definitions as to what constituted a talk station. Talk grew as a format throughout the 1980s, but probably not quickly enough to produce these station numbers in 1985 and 1987; Sheryl James, "AM Turning To Talk Radio," The St Petersburg Times, November 24, 1987. Peter Viles, "Talk Radio Riding High: Both Ratings and Influence Are on the Rise; Can Respect Be Far Behind," Broadcasting and Cable, June 15, 1992, 24; Jim Cooper, "Talkers Brace for 'Fairness' Assault. (Radio Talk Show Hosts: Reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine of Equal Air Time For Political Speech) (Radio 1993)," Broadcasting and Cable, September 6, 1993, 44; Richard Corliss and John F. Dickerson, "Look Who Is Talking," Time, January 23, 1995, Volume 145, Issue 3, 22-25; Michahl Sifry and Marc Cooper, "Americans Talk Back to Power," The Nation, April 10, 1995; Susan Douglas, Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 300.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Tom Leykis, Interview With Author, August 19, 2014; Maurice Tunick, Interview With Author, November 17, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Barry Farber Interview With Author, November 29, 2012.

Even as the talk programming on many stations increased, the programming sounded quite different from what talk radio sounded like after 1988.<sup>36</sup> The majority of markets that had talk stations aired a format similar to KABC and KGO. Most hosts kept their political perspectives to themselves. Unlike today, even stations with hosts with clear political perspectives, like Ray Briem, Joel A. Spivek, and Bob Grant, had hosts with competing perspectives mixed with apolitical expert talk.

The conservative Barry Farber believed that most hosts in his era would be more likely to "fly down the Amazon and get our head shrunk before it would have occurred to attack the president." Instead, during his time on the air, Farber sought guests who were interesting and engrossing, regardless of the subject matter. He was always gracious to guests and callers. Farber believed that the one trap that a host/booker did not want to fall into was hosting a guest "so damn dull and inarticulate that he couldn't ab lib a belch after a Bulgarian wedding." When Rush Limbaugh came along, Farber wondered, "why didn't I think of that?"

Similarly, Michael Jackson, a liberal, and Los Angeles' star host during this era, had every sort of caller and guest imaginable on his show. A *Time* profile during Jackson's early days at KEWB in San Francisco quoted comedian Mort Sahl, who dubbed Jackson "the all night psychiatrist" because of the way that he advised callers with diverse life problems (a pregnant teen needed advice on how and when to tell her parents, a woman wondered why her husband ignored her, etc).<sup>37</sup> Jackson wanted to learn as much as possible from his on-air conversations, and he did substantial research before each interview. He loved meeting the people who he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> In her account of the rise of talk radio, Susan Douglas argued that hosts such as Bob Grant and Joe Pyne were the norm in talk radio prior to 1988, and hosts such as Farber and Jackson were exceptions to this norm. My research clearly demonstrates the opposite to be true; See Susan, Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 283-318

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> "The All-Night Psychiatrist," *Time* 80, no. 12 (September 21st, 1962): 72-73.

interviewed and who called into his show. He interviewed guests who disagreed with his views, and he tried to be hospitable to get more out of interview subjects. While Jackson interviewed political figures, including Presidents Nixon and Carter, he also hosted starlets Katherine Hepburn and Bette Davis, international figures, like Prince Phillip and Moshe Dayan, drug addicts, and even mobster Mickey Cohen. Jackson led by asking if Cohen had ever killed anyone. Cohen forced him to rephrase the question, but then acknowledged that some people were no longer around because of his actions—but only those who had it coming to them!<sup>38</sup>

In some markets a more in your face, boundary pushing, outrageous style of talk did exist in the early 1970s. For example, KNEW in San Francisco aired a boisterous, controversial format with strong political viewpoints in order to differentiate itself from KGO.<sup>39</sup> But the format petered out in San Francisco and elsewhere before rebounding in some major markets in the early 1980s.<sup>40</sup> According to host Tom Leykis, who broadcast this sort of show in Miami in 1984 and 1985, the number of talk stations and programs in a market determined whether or not it had this type of programming. In Miami, Leykis' style was the norm because four news/talk programs competed for listeners.<sup>41</sup> Yet, unlike the Limbaugh era, in so much as these hosts discussed politics,<sup>42</sup> many broadcast a liberal perspective. Before Limbaugh, no outrageous talk program was syndicated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Michael Jackson, Interview With Author, January 28, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Mickey Luckoff, Interview With Author, August 27, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Richard Lacayo, Elaine Dutka, Marilyn Alva, "Audiences Love to Hate Them," *Time*, July 9, 1984, Volume 124, Issue 2, 86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Tom Leykis, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> A 1984 *Time* article included Howard Stern, whose show largely stayed away from politics, along with other more political hosts; Richard Lacayo, Elaine Dutka, Marilyn Alva, "Audiences Love to Hate Them," *Time* 124, no. 2 (July 9, 1984): 86.

By the late 1970s, the major radio networks began nationally syndicating talk programs at night. In 1978, The Mutual Broadcasting System tabbed Miami's Larry King as its overnight syndicated host. King's program, which combined three hours of newsmaker interviews with three hours of open line listener calls, became immensely popular (by 1982 he had 4 million listeners<sup>43</sup> per night). King discussed anything and everything, and while he occasionally aired his liberal views, they were not a major part of the program.<sup>44</sup>

King's popularity, along with the struggles of many local AM music stations, spurred NBC and ABC into producing syndicated talk—NBC Talknet debuted in 1981, with financial adviser Bruce Williams and relationship maven Sally Jesse Raphael hosting late night shows. Programmer Maurice Tunick tried to mimic what he thought made popular New York talker Bernard Meltzer successful (financial and relationship advice) with Raphael and Williams. ABC Talkradio, a more ambitious venture, launched in 1982, and essentially syndicated the strongest hosts from KGO and KABC nationally throughout most of the day. The effort failed, in part because the hosts, who fit their local communities so well, did not click with the more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup>A discrepancy existed as to how many listeners King had each night. Gay Miller put his audience at 2 million per night in 1979, Kevin Goldstein wrote in 1982 that King had 4 million listeners per night, and Lacayo, Dutka and Alva estimated King's audience to be 3.5 million per night. Yet, Lynn Darling's 1979 profile of King placed his audience at 10 million per night; Gay Sands Miller, "King of the Night: Radio's Larry King Gives Fans a Big Lift," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 1979, 1; Lynn Darling, "Larry King of the Late-Night Airwaves; The Catalyst for 10 Million Listeners, Coast to Coast," *The Washington Post*, June 19, 1979, Final Ed, B1; Kevin L Goldman, "Radio's Latest Boom: Late-Night Talk Shows," *The New York Times*, May 2, 1982, Arts and Leisure 2; Lacayo, Dutka, and Alva, "Audiences Love to Hate Them."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Sands Miller, "King of the Night;" Darling, "Larry King of the Late-Night Airwaves;"Roger Piantadosi, "The Calls of the Wild -- and the Mildly Indignant," *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1979, Final Ed, B1. All accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> NBC successfully tested Meltzer in Louisville to see if his style worked outside of New York. The network, could not, however, reach contractual terms with him; Maurice Tunick, Interview With Author, November 19, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Myron Berger, "Network Radio is Tuning Into Satellites," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1981, Arts and Leisure 2; Goldman, "Radio's Latest Boom: Late-Night Talk Shows."

diverse national audiences, and in part because of other factors (such as starting out on weaker stations because the best stations believed that localism was integral to success).

Even the popular Jackson struggled to fit in nationally. According to Maurice Tunick, who moved from NBC to ABC in 1985:

I'd get off the airplane in Los Angeles, you'd get in the rental car, turn on Michael Jackson and it was as good and riveting a talk show as there could be. But then a week later, you'd get off the airplane in Pittsburgh, get in the rental car and put on Michael Jackson and there was something that just didn't click when you were in Pittsburgh listening to Michael Jackson. It just didn't sync up with the city I was in, the look of the city, the temperatures outside. It didn't have the same feel as it had in Los Angeles.

The hosts from KABC and KGO simply did not connect to small town America, and cities outside of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Unlike Williams and Raphael, who discussed deeply personal issues, many Talkradio hosts discussed national and West Coast issues. Listeners anywhere could relate to conversation about relationships or financial troubles, but topical discussion, be it about the environment, a tax initiative, or a locally relevant problem, like immigration, did not translate as well outside of the local market.

This conundrum prompted local executives to guard against their hosts compromising local ratings in order to connect nationally. They fretted that diluting a host's local focus and reducing discussion of local issues might damage the connection between host and listeners. Michael Jackson also struggled because his local bosses did not want him on the network because he got incredible ratings locally, and there was more advertising to be sold locally than nationally.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Tunick wanted to add fiery Bob Grant from WABC in New York to the network, but WABC executives refused because they worried that without the ability to talk about Mayor Ed Koch, Grant would lose something. They considered his popularity to stem, in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Jackson, Interview With Author.

part, from being the guy who was in the neighborhoods with people, reflecting their views. By 1988, Talkradio had dropped most of its daytime programs, and ABC ended the network in 1990.

Talk radio remained locally focused at the time when Limbaugh began broadcasting nationally in 1988. Ben Hoberman, who became ABC Radio President in 1979, contended that the national marketplace was just not ready for syndicated talk programming because there were not enough stations. Content-wise, hosts' views did not typically dominate their broadcasts. Rather, most hosts whose political perspective drove their broadcasts fit into a separate radio tradition.

#### **Conservative Radio's Roots**

Conservative opinion radio was the second radio tradition that Limbaugh joined together in his unique program.<sup>48</sup> At first blush, one might consider Limbaugh to be the direct descendent of broadcasters like Father Charles Coughlin, Clarence Manion, and Dan Smoot. Yet, he had a fundamentally different purpose and style from these broadcasters.

Coughlin's wildly popular,<sup>49</sup> weekly, hour-long *Golden Hour of the Little Flower* inaugurated conservative radio in the 1930s.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, Smoot, Manion, and others like them conducted conservative radio broadcasts beginning in the 1950s and running into the 1970s. They broadcast short (for Smoot and Manion, fifteen minutes), one way (i.e. they took no

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Scholar Heather Hendershot categorized Limbaugh as being part of the third period of conservative radio broadcasting (he might be considered to be the leading edge of this third wave); Heather Hendershot, "Introduction," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 160-165.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> At its peak, the Golden Hour of the Little Flower had at least 10 million listeners weekly; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 119-120.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> When Coughlin's sermons first took a political turn in 1930, they might have qualified as liberal, or at the very least, populist. Coughlin harshly criticized President Hoover, and championed Franklin Roosevelt in the 1932 election. As he became disenchanted with Roosevelt in the mid-1930s, however, his sermons took a conservative turn, and his last six years on the air constituted conservative broadcasting; See Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 93-268.

calls from listeners), weekly programs that aimed to share a conservative perspective with the masses.

These hosts had substantially different business models from Limbaugh. Their programs<sup>51</sup> existed because of the largesse of conservative benefactors, such as H.L. Hunt (who sponsored his own series of conservative shows beginning in 1951).<sup>52</sup> They could not employ a traditional advertising model because of their controversial political perspective. Even hosts like Smoot, who sold advertising, relied on the beneficence of wealthy conservative businessmen, such as dog food magnate D.B. Lewis, who purchased enough advertising to keep their programs affoat. These businessmen cared primarily about promoting their ideology, not about ratings success. These hosts broadcast primarily on small stations, many owned by fundamentalist Christians, and utilized to broadcast sermons, church music, and conservative political and theological shows.<sup>53</sup> Some of the hosts actually paid for their airtime.

While Limbaugh shared many of the views espoused by Manion, Smoot and others (albeit with sunnier, more optimistic packaging), he had a fundamentally different goal. He needed to attract commercial advertisers by generating good ratings, which required entertaining listeners. By contrast, as Hendershot described, Smoot "wanted to inform people; people would tune in because they wanted the truth, not because the delivery of the truth was flashy or fun."<sup>54</sup> As such, Smoot's program was often, "exceedingly dull." Similarly, Manion's broadcasts could

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup>Coughlin's program had a similar business model in that he bought airtime from stations and built his own distribution network after CBS refused to continue carrying his program as it grew more political and controversial in 1931. Yet, instead of relying on a few large donors for survival, Coughlin received regular donations from fans and refused sponsorship offers; Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 99-100 & 120.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Hendershot, What's Fair on the Air, 26-64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> As Hendershot recounted, several popular, conservative Christian radio programs also thrived during this period; Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air*, 1821.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Hendershot, What's Fair on the Air, 2018.

be "cerebral, dense, and stultifying." While they educated about the dangers of Communism, Limbaugh coined the term "gorbasm" to describe "the expression of sheer delight that [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev was on the scene." Gorbasms had their own theme song—*Star Wars*' Imperial March (Darth Vader's theme). They represented Limbaugh's humorous critique of the notion that, "nuclear holocaust is at hand because Ronald Reagan is in the White House, but only Mikhail Gorbachev can save the day, can save the world, can save the planet! He's reasonable. Reagan has an itchy trigger finger, right there poised above that button." <sup>56</sup>

Limbaugh had more in common with the few outspoken conservative talk radio hosts from this earlier period, such as Bob Grant, Joe Pyne, and Neal Boortz (all of whom were first rate showmen), but, again, he differed stylistically. Grant entertained by bellowing at callers to get off his phone—which demonstrated his showmanship as he was gentle and soft-spoken off the air<sup>57</sup>—and Pyne told callers to gargle with razor blades. Pyne "aimed to provoke people into listening and thinking."<sup>58</sup> Don Page of the *Los Angeles Times* noted that his "forte is the unadulterated insult, the sensational slap in the face."<sup>59</sup> Grant and Pyne delighted their audiences by abusing callers, and their programs centered around callers and interviews.<sup>60</sup> Limbaugh, by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Hendershot contrasted Limbaugh with Smoot because Limbaugh was "first and foremost an entertainer, and for those who enjoy his style of humor, a comedian." More broadly, she argued "the contemporary crowd [of conservative talk radio hosts] is varied and nuanced, their hard extremist edges often—though not always—blunted. And, more importantly, they are entertainers." Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air*, Kindle Edition, 2017 and 2020; Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right*, 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, "The Original Gorbasm," February 2, 2005, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/02/02/the\_original\_gorbasm2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Tunick, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Bob Rose, "Kook-Baiting Pyne Likes Controversy," The Washington Post, July 29, 1967, D15, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Don Page, "Pyne Newest Figure to Stir the Natives," The Los Angeles Times, April 22, 1962, L30, accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Colford, Rush Limbaugh Story, 141.

contrast, went out of his way to be polite to callers, but he took fewer callers than most talk radio hosts and conducted almost no interviews. The entertainment value from his show came from humor, imitations, absurdity, parodies, and zaniness, not ridicule and fire breathing.

### The Sensibility of a Disc Jockey

The light-hearted antics of radio disc jockeys represented the final radio tradition that Limbaugh appropriated. He had spent much of the 1970s spinning rock and pop records on music stations, and his high energy delivery and style changed relatively minimally between his days as a disc jockey and the debut of his national talk program in 1988. During a 1990 promotional appearance, Limbaugh told Detroit host and former Cy Young Award-winning pitcher Denny McClain that he developed his "schtick"—his sense of humor and the bits he did —during his days as a DJ. He noted that he had always thought about incorporating this style into a long form talk show, because he believed that young people could be entertained by a talk show, as well as by music.<sup>61</sup> Limbaugh emulated and adapted many stylistic elements and phrases from his hero, famed Chicago disc jockey Larry Lujack. For example, Lujack utilized calculated pauses during which he would rustle papers in front of him to lend his show "an air of informality and reality.<sup>62</sup>" Similarly, Limbaugh rustled the news clippings he was about to read, and he would frequently describe holding things in his "formerly nicotine stained fingers."63 Often Limbaugh shared with listeners what was happening inside of his studio—on his third anniversary show, he noted that he was holding a sneeze back with his knuckle.<sup>64</sup> Additionally,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> I received a copy of this broadcast from Art Vuolo's collection. Art provided me with all of the recordings that he had of Limbaugh from this period. See http://www.vuolovideo.com for more information on Art's collection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Colford, Rush Limbaugh Story, 97-98 & 146-149.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Art Vuolo recorded the first 20 minutes of this program, dated August 1, 1991. See http://www.vuolovideo.com for more information on Art's collection.

Limbaugh chose the riff from the Pretenders' "My City Was Gone" as the theme music for show, and used other popular music for his parodies, to punctuate key moments, and to serve as bumper music leading into and out of segments (on a C-SPAN simulcast in 1990, Limbaugh even played air guitar and sang along with several bumper songs).<sup>65</sup>

Overall, he innovated something entirely new—a nationally syndicated, opinion driven show that combined the fun of rock music radio with interactive talk radio and a strong political perspective. Most radio listeners had never heard anything like Limbaugh's show. It was a formula, adroitly delivered, that changed the entire industry.

# The Colossus Rises

Many liberals have long assumed that conservatives dominate talk radio because conservative radio executives have used their businesses to advance an ideological agenda. Liberal radio host Bill Press wrote, "the number-one reason conservatives overwhelmingly dominate talk radio today is because *that's what conservative owners demand*—even if they lose money in the process." Similarly Senator Byron Dorgan believed that liberal talk shows had a

<sup>65</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, June 1, 1990, <a href="http://www.c-span.org/video/?12584-1/rush-limbaugh-show-simulcast">http://www.c-span.org/video/?12584-1/rush-limbaugh-show-simulcast</a>.

glass ceiling because owners decided what they put on the air, and owners were more conservative, and thus leaned towards conservative talk.<sup>66</sup>

This perception, however, was incorrect. In reality, the vast majority of station executives<sup>67</sup> would happily program any format that would be profitable, regardless of their

<sup>66</sup> Press cited five cases in which programmers replaced liberal talk stations that experienced ratings success with formats that received much lower listenership. Ratings success, however, did not always translate into high advertising rates (such stations would be classified as having a low power ratio), which were the goal of commercial owners. For example, sports talk, which replaced several of these liberal stations, might have appealed to more advertisers than liberal talk, even it drew lower ratings, because of its less polarizing nature. It threatened no potential boycott or backlash from customers who objected to an advertiser purchasing time on a program advocating a particular political perspective. Indeed, sports talk was unlikely to land on "no buy" lists, which precluded ads from airing on certain programs. By contrast, however, all of Air America's programs inhabited such lists. Similarly, Eric Klineberg cited several examples of hosts being disciplined after publicly questioning the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars to charge that Clear Channel punished liberal hosts. However, Klineberg never provided evidence that Clear Channel executives acted against these hosts because of their views, as opposed to acting because of listener complaints, an understanding of their markets, normal budgetary reasons, etc. The major corporations running most radio stations today supported and contributed to Republican and conservative causes. However, no evidence existed that these political sentiments guided programming decisions. Indeed, William G. Mayer argued that the ideological imbalance in talk radio programming did not derive from bias because, "from the perspective of a station owner, ideological purity is an unaffordable luxury;" See Bill Press, Toxic Talk: How the Radical Right Has Poisoned America's Airwayes (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 245-249; Klineberg, Fighting For Air (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 76-79; Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative, Public Interest 156: 86-103; Byron Dorgan, Interview With Author, May 13, 2013.

<sup>67</sup>Although bias played a small role in the ideological imbalance on talk radio, it did motivate a small number of programming decisions. Especially before the 1996 Telecommunications Act accelerated consolidation of radio ownership, the small corporations and individuals who owned stations did apply an ideological litmus test to their programming in some limited cases. These cases fueled the belief on the left that conservative executives hijacked talk radio for political purposes. Yet, liberal owners also imposed an ideological litmus test on programming on occasion. For example, the Bullitt sisters generally refused to air conservative programs on KING-AM in Seattle during the 1980s and 1990s. During Dennis Kelly's tenure at KING, any program that could be perceived as being somewhat conservative did not last long on the station. Eventually, however, as Rush Limbaugh's program became successful on a competing station, and KING started losing money, Jack Swanson (who was KING's General Manager) convinced the Bullitt sisters to broadcast Gordon Liddy's program (one of the sisters described Liddy as "that horrid man") in an attempt to counter Limbaugh's popularity; David Rimmer, Interview With Author, September 6, 2012; Dennis Kelly, Interview with Author, February 8, 2013; Shannon Sweatte, Interview with Author, April 15, 2013; Susan Paynter, "King Saved By Liddy? Gee, Gordon," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, September 10, 1993.

personal ideology.<sup>68</sup> In fact, many of the programmers who advanced conservative talk and programmed conservative formats possessed liberal or moderate beliefs.<sup>69</sup> For example, Jack Swanson, a liberal, built the nation's second all conservative talk station, KSFO in San Francisco. Additionally, even some conservative programmers, such as Brian Jennings, who served as the Vice President of Programming for Citadel Communications, would have had no problem airing liberal programs if they believed that such a format could thrive. Jennings told the program directors with whom he worked that he would play polka music backwards if it got

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Even some cases in which a liberal's viewpoint hampered his/her ability to get clearance on stations actually supported the notion that commercial considerations, not viewpoint discrimination, drove decision making. For example, Alan Colmes achieved good ratings when his program aired on strong signal stations. However, he has had clearance problems over the years. In 1994, Colmes followed Rush Limbaugh on over 100 stations. Yet, his show did not air in the biggest markets like New York and Washington. Additionally, stations in San Diego, Dallas, and Orlando dropped his program in spite of high ratings, sometimes because of his perspective. In fact, over the years, many programmers told Colmes that they would air his show if he was conservative. Yet, Colmes' struggles have had less to do with ideology, and more to do with business. For example, in Dallas, programmer Jeff Hillery built a format largely designed to appeal to conservative men (Fox News updates, Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Dr. Laura, Michael Savage, and two local hosts). Yet, he took a chance that the quirky listeners at night would enjoy Colmes, because Colmes was "a likable liberal," and produced an entertaining show. Colmes did phenomenally well in the ratings, beating rival talkers. Subsequently, however, new ownership cut a deal with a syndicator to get Savage's show back on KLIF (Savage had switched affiliates previously) that included replacing Colmes with several other conservative programs offered by that syndicator. Indeed, in most cases, the need to accommodate other programming, as in the Dallas example, or the desire to adopt an all conservative format dictated stations dropping Colmes' program. In the latter cases, the programmers wanted format purity to avoid upsetting their most loyal primary listeners (P1s). Some wanted to use their night time programming to drive listeners to their morning shows, which was hard to accomplish if the audience for that conservative morning show had turned off the liberal night time host, even if a large new audience replaced those listeners; Hillery put Colmes on KLIF in spite of his own right leaning political proclivities, evidenced by the fact that he worked for the Texas Senate Republican caucus. See Hillery's Linked In profile: "Jeff Hillery," Linkedin, http://www.linkedin.com/pub/jeff-hillery/24/b85/204 (accessed June 8, 2015); Alan Colmes, Interview with Author, November 8, 2012; Howard Kurtz, "Radio Daze A Day With the Country's Masters of Gab: Is America Talking Itself Silly?" The Washington Post, October 24, 1994; Cindy Richards, "Taking Back Talk Radio," The Chicago Sun Times, November 20, 1994; Hillery, E-mail message to Author, March 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> In making a similar argument, William G. Mayer cited the case of a left of center Hartford host who lost his time slot to a conservative syndicated program and assumed that the station fired him for ideological reasons. The host later learned that his bosses shared his political views, and cared solely about ratings. See Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative," 96.

ratings. Even Tom Tradup, the conservative programmer of the Salem Radio Networks,<sup>70</sup> who doubted that liberal radio could succeed, dabbled with airing the radical Jay Marvin at night on WLS in Chicago.<sup>71</sup>

Station owners and syndicators often displayed a similarly bottom line attitude. When conservative Clear Channel CEO Mark Mays instructed programmer Gabe Hobbs to explore the possibility of putting the liberal Air America network on some Clear Channel stations, Hobbs queried whether Mays would be comfortable airing liberal content. Mays replied that when it came to the company, his politics were neither red, nor blue, but rather green. Owners might have been less willing to fight to keep syndicated programming, or might have exhibited less patience with developing programming if they disagreed with the host, but they largely strove to air whatever they believed would be most profitable. This rule especially held true for the giant conglomerates that owned most stations in the 2000s. They primarily focused on delivering value to their shareholders.

If, however, bias did not explain the programming decisions in talk radio, then why did a 2007 survey find that 91% of weekday talk radio programs were conservative in a closely

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Ownership's ideological predilections dictated programming at Salem, making it the exception, not the rule, in radio. Salem stations aired either conservative talk or religious programming; Kevin Casey, "Something Big Happening at Salem," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 153 (November 2004): 18-21, 46

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Jack Swanson, Interview With Author, September 19, 2012; David Rimmer, Interview With Author, September 6, 2012; Brian Jennings, Interview With Author, October 29, 2012; Tom Tradup, Interview with Author, November 13, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Gabe Hobbs, Interview with Author; See also Michael Harrison, Interview With Amy Bolton, *Talkers Magazine*, no. 153 (November 2004): 32 & 40; This paradigm also held for liberal station owners. In 1980, Peter and Ellen Strauss, who owned WMCA in New York, were major fundraisers for President Carter's reelection campaign. Yet, none of WMCA's air staff supported Carter's reelection. Nonetheless, the Strausses did nothing to intervene or attempt to influence what their hosts said on the air; Barry Farber, Interview with Author, November 29, 2012;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Former KVI General Manager Shannon Sweatte believed that one reason that KVI owner Fisher allowed Rush Limbaugh to leave the station without much of a fight was the discomfort of Fisher executives (and the television journalists working on Fisher's TV stations) with Limbaugh's conservative viewpoints. However, even in this case, Sweatte also believed that a desire to shed the large cash fee that Fisher paid to air Limbaugh's show also played a role in the decision; Sweatte, Interview With Author.

divided country? The answer lies in understanding the historical development of modern talk radio—a relatively recent programming format. Many liberals misperceived the origins of the conservative dominance of talk radio in part because few have explored the development of talk radio over the past quarter of a century.

This chapter, by contrast, tells the story of the rapid expansion of talk radio after 1988, and the slower process through which the format became almost uniformly syndicated, conservative, and political, which took roughly fifteen years to play out fully. The ideological shape of talk radio developed gradually over that period. The popularity of Rush Limbaugh after he debuted nationally in 1988, and the success of the first few uniformly conservative talk stations in the early to mid 1990s, drove this process. Programmers credited conservatism for this success, and when coupled with the failure of several mid-1990s liberal talk shows, this development inclined many programmers to try entirely conservative talk formats. The preference of many programmers for pure formats (i.e. providing predictable, consistent programming as one would on music radio by having a country music station or a classical music station) and the tendency of many programmers to mimic successful formats reinforced this inclination. Syndication and consolidation contributed to this process because they pushed programmers towards more generic, conservative programming by stifling experimentation, and encouraging executives to double down on thriving formats in a quest for economies of scale. Finally, unbeknownst to him, Limbaugh attracted an audience that had an almost insatiable desire for conservative programming. This audience propelled conservative talk to ratings success. At every step along the way, commercial imperatives, and the desire to create the most successful, and most profitable station possible motivated station executives.

#### Talk Radio's Rise

AM radio faced dire straits in the late 1980s. From its introduction in 1961, music broadcast on FM frequencies sounded better than it did on AM frequencies, and after 1967, the FCC prohibited stations from simulcasting their AM content on FM. This rule, along with the emergence of a "profoundly anti-commercial, anti-corporate ethos,"<sup>74</sup> allowed for the development of groundbreaking, innovative FM music stations.<sup>75</sup> Especially once FM stereos became standard in homes and cars, listeners turned to FM to hear music—AM's share of the radio audience dropped from 75% in 1972 to 25% in 1988.<sup>76</sup> As listeners moved to FM, advertising dollars followed. Accordingly, AM's share of the ad revenue dropped from 90% in 1970 to around half in 1985.<sup>77</sup> This left programmers scrambling to save the AM band, even as AM stations had higher structural costs than FM stations.<sup>78</sup> Compounding this problem, many executives at the top full service AM stations did not react quickly enough during the 1970s to save their stations, because as listenership dropped off, ad revenue initially remained stable. These stations had good, productive relationships with their advertising clients, and the clients reacted more slowly to dropping ratings, lulling station executives into a false sense of security. By the time that the drop off in ad revenue caught up to the listenership decline, the stations were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 259.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> See Douglas, *Listening In*, 255-282, for a complete description of the rise of FM radio, including the myriad cultural roots related to the counterculture, masculinity, and the quest for authenticity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> "The Trend Continues," *Broadcasting* 115, no. 1 (July 4, 1988): 40. "Can AM Radio Be Saved," *Broadcasting and Cable*, July 3rd, 1989, 20; Unmacht, Interview with Author, January 25, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> "AM Radio: Survival of the Fittest—AM Fights Back (On Radio—Special Section) *Broadcasting and Cable*, August 14, 1989, 54. David Kinney, "Will AM Radio Fade Out as Force in Broadcasting, *Business-North Carolina*, July 1, 1986, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Paul Fiddick, Interview With Author, December 21, 2012.

often beyond being salvaged.<sup>79</sup> By 1987, three out of four big city AM stations, and about half of those in smaller markets, made no profit.<sup>80</sup>

During the 1980s, many AM stations found that a news/talk format offered the potential for survival.<sup>81</sup> Unlike for music, the lack of a stereo medium mattered little for talk radio; the human voice sounded fine on AM frequencies. The news/talk format also provided AM radio with unique programming that FM did not offer, an element critical to surviving.<sup>82</sup> WABC in New York had been the nation's top rated radio station with a top 40 music format. However, during the 1970s, WKTU, an FM disco station, eclipsed and began annihilating WABC in the ratings. In 1982, WABC's programming staff told ABC network management that WABC could never return to being number one by playing music. The programmers also told management that they might be able to build a more highly rated talk franchise. Out of desperation, the network executives accepted the uncertainty and flipped the station's format.<sup>83</sup> This process repeated itself nationwide; by the time WABC changed formats, ABC had transitioned all but one of its AM stations to talk programming.<sup>84</sup> By 1986, Bernie Mann, the President of the National Association of Radio Broadcasters, believed that the most successful AM stations broadcast a news/talk

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Unmacht, Interview with Author; Douglas argues that some of the lag between FM's audience share and the percentage of advertising revenue allocated to FM had to do with FM airing fewer commercials and advertisers' doubts about their ability to sell products on FM. Douglas, *Listening In*, 275-276.

<sup>80</sup> Deborah Mesce, "Troubled Times for AM Radio," The Associated Press, April 10, 1988.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> The news/talk format provided spoken word programming that addressed a broad array of topics, including, but not limited to, politics.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> John Burgess, "AM Radio Fights Against Decline," *The Houston Chronicle*, April 3rd, 1988. Janet DeStefano, "Yakity-Yak: AM Radio Talks Back to Compete," *The Record*, May 24, 1987, e2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Frank J Prial, "WABC is Dropping Music Format to Switch to Talk and News," *The New York Times*, February 23, 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Steve Goldstein, Interview with Author.

format.<sup>85</sup> Stations that switched to a talk format often saw explosive ratings growth. WOL-AM in Washington saw its audience increase by 48% after switching formats in 1981.<sup>86</sup>

Talk radio offered a refuge because a perfect storm<sup>87</sup> of developments, including new satellite and cell phone technologies, the demise of a regulation called the Fairness Doctrine, the ascendance of Rush Limbaugh, and the ability to tap into an alienated, but previously undiscovered, audience, spurred the development and the expansion of edgy, opinionated, political talk formats. This breed of talk sounded starkly different than the genial, staid, information and interview based talk programming that existed before 1988. Combined, these developments saved the AM band.<sup>88</sup> They produced a rapid and substantial increase in the number of talk radio stations at the end of the nineteen-eighties and the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Kinney, "Will AM Radio Fade Out?"

<sup>86</sup> Douglas, Listening In, 288.

<sup>87</sup> In discussing the rise of outrage media (cable news, talk radio and the blogosphere), Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj write, "we see instead a perfect storm of political transitions, regulatory shifts and technological advances that have fundamentally altered the relationship between producers, advertisers, media content, and the public (90)." Though we use the same term to describe the rise of ideological media, there are many differences between our accounts. We discuss several of the same broad areas (such as technology and regulatory changes), but we cite very different specific elements. More importantly, we disagree on the periodization involved. Many of the developments that Berry and Sobieraj discuss (things like voice tracking technology and streaming music services) happened long after talk radio ascended. They observe how much the format grew during the 2000s, but this growth actually constituted the second part of an expansion that began far earlier, as this chapter explains; Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the new Incivility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 66-94.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Douglas' *Listening In* offered an account of talk radio's rise. Douglas correctly noted the troubles facing AM radio, and the impact of new technologies, a culturally alienated potential audience, and deregulation on the ascendence of talk radio. She failed, however, to recognize the impact of Rush Limbaugh in spurring this transition, and the way in which the style of talk radio changed significantly because of his early success in national syndication. Instead, Douglas perceived the styles of Limbaugh, Howard Stern, and others as continuing in the tradition of earlier talk radio. In reality, this contention rested upon a misreading of the earlier talk radio landscape. The hosts whose work exhibited similarities to Limbaugh, Stern, etc., had been exceptions to the more staid norm exemplified by hosts such as Michael Jackson. Similarly, Douglas failed to note that before Limbaugh, only major markets experienced this sort of loud, opinionated talk. She also did not cover the process by which AM talk became almost entirely conservative as this chapter does. See Douglas, *Listening In*, 283-318;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> This dissertation primarily discusses political talk radio, and it borrows David C. Barker's definition, which identifies political talk radio as "call-in shows that emphasize discussion of politicians, elections, and public policy issues." Barker, "Political Talk Radio and Vote Choice 1994-1996, 528.

The number of these stations increased from two in 1960, to fifty-nine in 1983, to 127 in 1987, to over 1200 in 1999.90

Technological and regulatory changes did not produce the rise of talk radio in a causal sense. Yet, they laid a critical foundation that made this rise possible (in the same way that a baseball or football game did not take place because a city built a stadium, but the stadium was a precondition for the game happening).

In 1987, the FCC repealed the Fairness Doctrine, which for thirty-eight years had required that broadcast television and radio stations provide balanced coverage of controversial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Berry and Sobieraj argued that dramatic growth in the number of talk radio stations occurred between 1991-2011, with the majority of the boom occurring during the 2000s. They credit the expansion of the format to new digital music technologies, such as voice tracking, which reduced the role of local DJs in music radio (thereby making music radio less attractive to audiences), and to the regulatory changes discussed in this chapter. However, Berry and Sobieraj crucially did not explain that the growth that they depicted was really the second half of a longer trend, as explained in this chapter. Furthermore, they offered an incomplete explanation as to the cause of the talk radio boom. The decline in popularity of music radio due to the transition away from strong, colorful local DJs who gave listeners a reason to listen in the era of iPods, Pandora, etc., contributed to the increasing number of FM talk radio stations. But this factor played, if anything, a small role in the talk radio boom of the 1990s. Similarly, the regulatory changes that they discussed influenced the talk radio boom, but they only constituted a small part of the explanation; Berry and Sobieraj, "Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio," Political Science, October 2011; Frank Ahrens, "Chat to The Future; Can Talk Radio Change With The Times? There's No Telling, *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1999, C1; Bolce, DeMaio, Muzzio, "Dial In Democracy, 459; Sheryl James, "AM Turning To Talk Radio," The St Petersburg Times, November 24, 1987. Peter Viles, "Talk Radio Riding High: Both Ratings and Influence Are on the Rise; Can Respect Be Far Behind," Broadcasting and Cable, June 15, 1992, 24; Jim Cooper, "Talkers Brace for 'Fairness' Assault. (Radio Talk Show Hosts; Reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine of Equal Air Time For Political Speech) (Radio 1993)," Broadcasting and Cable, September 6, 1993, 44.

issues.<sup>91</sup> President Reagan vetoed bipartisan legislation that would have reimplemented the doctrine.<sup>92</sup> Many radio professionals, including Michael Harrison, the editor of the industry publication, *Talkers Magazine*, and programmer Brian Jennings, believed that the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine was the most critical factor in the rise of talk radio because it opened the door to airing unrestrained opinion about controversial issues. This view did not go unchallenged.

John Mainelli, the program director who brought Rush Limbaugh to WABC in New York, and who programmed in Kansas City and San Diego under the Fairness Doctrine, argued that it in no way impeded his ability to program political talk shows.<sup>93</sup>

In reality, the demise of the fairness doctrine removed an obstacle to opinionated radio, but it was not causal. It made it easier to program talk stations without fear of an FCC complaint, but the potential for a complaint merely necessitated good record keeping. The three years that Rush Limbaugh broadcast his boundary pushing, controversial program on KFBK in Sacramento under the Fairness Doctrine supported this analysis. According to one executive, the "shadow" of

<sup>91</sup> President Reagan's conservative FCC commissioners abolished the Fairness Doctrine seemingly without any inkling that doing so would benefit their party politically. Rather, they acted because of their commitment to deregulation and their belief that the Fairness Doctrine impermissibly restricted free speech. They believed that the market adequately policed content; listeners would turn off unfair or inaccurate radio. For a history of the FCC's battle against the Fairness Doctrine between 1981 and 1987 see Donald Jung, *The Federal Communications Commission, the Broadcast Industry, and the Fairness Doctrine 1981-1987* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1996). For the Fairness Doctrine's pre-1981 history see Steven J. Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and The Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), especially 16-71. See also, Peter Boyer, "FCC Struggled With Itself Six Years Before Reversing a Policy It Opposed," *The New York Times*, August 6, 1987; Martin Tolchin, "How Fair is the Fairness Doctrine," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1987; Ernest Holsendoph, "FCC Asks End of Fairness Doctrine," *The New York Times*, September 18, 1981. Tom Shales, "Danger Signs: The FCC Homes In on the Fairness Doctrine," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1981; Ernest Holsendoph, "FCC Chief Assails 'Fairness' Policy," *The New York Times*, April 8, 1982; "Q&A: Mark S. Fowler; An F.C.C. For the Common Man," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1985; Reginald Stuart, "The Fowler Years," *Broadcasting*, March 2, 1987, 51-54; Reginald Stuart, "Fairness Doctrine Assailed By FCC," *The New York Times*, August 8, 1985.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Senate In Returning Without Approval The Fairness in Broadcasting Bill," June 19, 1987, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/061987h.htm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup>. John Mainelli e-mail message to author, November 11, 2010; Michael Harrison, interview with Author, November 9, 2010; Brian Jennings, interview with author.

the Fairness Doctrine "didn't really play into our day-to-day operation at KFBK." Additionally, two other acerbic and controversial hosts, Bob Grant and Neal Boortz, provoked listeners for more than fifteen years under the Fairness Doctrine. Some executives and hosts more willingly programmed and conducted edgy opinionated talk shows without the Fairness Doctrine in place, because previously their bosses had feared FCC complaints and running afoul of equal time requirements. Talk radio host Barry Farber, a New York star during the 1970s and 1980s, worried about airing controversial viewpoints on his program, for fear that an interview with, for example, a Holocaust survivor would necessitate having a Nazi SS guard on to fulfill equal time requirements.

Several new technological innovations also made the rise of talk radio possible. The introduction of new, cheap satellite technology made it easier to nationally syndicate a radio program. Previously, talk had been a predominately local format, but local talk cost too much for many stations, because hosts had to have better radio skills than the average DJ, and thus required higher pay. Talk also required a host, a producer, an engineer, a programmer, and a researcher. Syndicated talk programs faced significant, if not insurmountable, obstacles because a syndicator would have had to distribute them over phone lines, which would have required local stations either to install expensive extra phone lines, or as most stations only had one phone line, meant that a syndicated host could not take phone calls and distribute his program simultaneously. It also would have limited syndicators to distributing one program at a time. Furthermore, the advent of cell phones allowed listeners to call talk stations from their cars.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> According to Tyler Cox, KFBK had another host who often delved into opposing viewpoints during that period of time; Tyler Cox, E-mail Message to Author, March 5, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Boortz Bio: Neal Boortz, aka: The Talkmaster, Mighty Whitey and The High Priest of The Church of the Painful Truth, February 28, 2001, <a href="http://www.boortz.com/news/entertainment/personalities/boortz-bio/n8Lt/">http://www.boortz.com/news/entertainment/personalities/boortz-bio/n8Lt/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Farber, Interview with Author.

When Gary Burns programmed WWRC in Washington DC between 1991 and 1993, the station cut a deal with the two leading cell phone providers to allow listeners to call the station for free.

The ability to call in while listening during one's commute boosted the popularity of talk radio.<sup>97</sup>

News/talk radio prospered economically because it became the neighborhood bar or front stoop in a virtual community at a time when American society had become increasingly isolating and Americans spent more time than ever in the car. Suburban sprawl that left neighbors further apart, as well as prosperity and technological innovation that generated new and more isolating forms of entertainment, like cable television and VHS movies, diminished front stoop or backyard fence conversation. Americans (especially older Americans) yearned for the kind of connection or dialogue that these community spaces previously offered. Talk radio provided a virtual replacement through which they could discuss a wide variety of issues. It even allowed for eavesdropping on other people's across the fence conversations. As talk show host Imhotep Gary Byrd noted, "It's (talk radio) the one medium left where people can interact with each other with a sense of immediacy." Simultaneously as host and programmer Tom Becka explained,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Burns, Interview with Author; Robert Unmacht, Interview with Author; Randall Bloomquist, Interview with Author. See Susan Douglas, *Listening In*, 288 and 293-295 for significantly more detail on these technical changes that propelled talk radio forward; Douglas, *Listening In*, 287.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Gil Troy discussed the cultural roots of the "glorious, but terrifying isolation" brought about by the individualism of the 1980s. He also observed, "talk radio would create an illusion of community and foster surprisingly strong sense of identity at a time when anonymous shopping malls replaced intimate main streets, and political debate was exiled from the interactive town square to the passive TV studio;" Gil Troy, *Morning In America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 115-146 & 276-280.

<sup>99</sup> Arlene Rodda, "Talk Radio: The Phenomenon and Some of Its Personalities," *The Alert Collector* 35, no 1. (September 1, 1995): 19' Richards, *Talking Back Talk Radio*; Arlene Levinson, "America's Yakking It Up: No Longer Silent Majority Sounds Off Via Phone, Computer, Fax," *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, September 4, 1994. "Talk Radio Is a Favorite Forum For GOP Presidential Hopefuls During New Hampshire's Leadoff Presidential Primary," *The Associated Press Political Service*, November 26, 1995; Harrison, interview with author; Martin Walker, "Patriotism in the Roar of Talk Radio," *The Guardian*, March 23, 1991; Alan W. Bock, "Yakkity, Yak! And You Can Talkback," *The Orange County Register*, March 12, 1989; Fraser Smith, "Big Talk: Radio Host Alan Christian Was on a Crusade to Save America— Until the Regulatory Lions Caught Up With Him," *Regardie's The Business of Washington*, October 1, 1990; Hennen, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Bruce Webber, "A Loud Angry World on the Dial," *The New York Times*, June 7, 1992, 31.

people no longer felt comfortable discussing many topics and felt like they could no longer say certain things in polite company, both for fear of offending someone. Talk radio, by contrast, discussed all of these topics, including politics, sex, and religion, in an entertaining way.<sup>101</sup>

Talk radio's intimacy made it ideal for filling this void in people's lives. <sup>102</sup> As host Thom Hartmann explained, radio was a voyeuristic, intimate, personal, one-on-one, "hot medium," (unlike TV, which was a "cold medium"). <sup>103</sup> As Atlanta host Neal Boortz described, ""I'm in the bathroom with these people...I'm in bed with them, taking showers, eating breakfast. This personal relationship gets built up. They think I'm talking to them one-on-one." <sup>104</sup> Former Congressman and talk radio host JD Hayworth fostered this intimacy on his program. For example, he might introduce a topic by reminding his listeners, "as you and I discussed the other day," thereby providing the illusion of an intimate conversation with each listener. <sup>105</sup> Once television surpassed the console radio as the family gathering point, this intimacy became radio's niche in people's lives. People listened individually on transistor and car radios, and they started

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Becka, Interview With Author; Susan Douglas explained that, "so many white men came to feel that they were walking on eggshells, that they didn't know what was right and wrong to say anymore, that they wanted a place where they, too, could exhale. Talk radio gave them that refuge;" Douglas, *Listening In*, 292; 310-312.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Roland Marchand wrote, "no other media had offered such potential for intimacy with the audience. Radio surpassed all others in its capacity to deny its own status as a *mass* medium...But radio carried the human voice directly into the privacy of the home, to the center of the revered family circle. In that setting, listeners might readily imagine that the speaker was talking personally to them." Although the settings in which people listened to radio changed dramatically over time, it retained this intimacy. Radio kept people company in their cars, in the shower, in bed at night, etc; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 88)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Thom Hartmann, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Vincent, Coppola, "Neal Boortz: Have Mouth, Will Talk," *Atlanta Magazine*, July 1, 1998, <a href="http://www.atlantamagazine.com/features/1998/07/01/neal-boortz-have-mouth-will-talk">http://www.atlantamagazine.com/features/1998/07/01/neal-boortz-have-mouth-will-talk</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> J.D. Hayworth, Interview With Author, September 26, 2012.

forging individual relationships with favorite hosts. <sup>106</sup> Over the years Tom Becka personified the-host-as-friend; listeners have brought him cookies and flowers as thanks for taking their minds off of cancer. Radio industry journalist Tom Taylor analogized these friendships between host and listener to when the cool kid in a high school talked to an individual in the hallway and suddenly that individual became cool. <sup>107</sup>

Local hosts were especially well situated to become intimate companions for their loyal listeners. One listener left her home to longtime host Los Angeles Ray Briem after she died. 108 Programmer and host Dave Elswick noted that, especially in small towns, radio hosts had real community impact. If a caller revealed that his brother's house burned down, the host could start a collection drive to help that person in need. 109 Even in big cities, long serving hosts could have a huge impact on individuals. Star Los Angeles host Bill Handel saved a half century old local toy shop by staging a "cash mob," in which he encouraged his listeners to shop at the store on a specific day and then spent hours signing autographs and greeting listeners who had heeded his call. 110

#### With Talent On Loan From God

Rush Limbaugh's successful emergence on to the national scene catalyzed both the rise of talk radio and its eventual transformation into a predominately conservative and political

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Building on previous media studies, Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj detailed the way in which "outrage media" hosts became friends to their fans, and connected them to like-minded others in an imagined community. Hosts were a "kindred spirit who 'gets you' even when other folks don't;" Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 132-135; Ron Hartenbaum, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Tom Becka, Interview With Author, December 19, 2012; Tom Taylor, Interview With Author, January 11, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Doug McIntyre, Interview With Author, November 1, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Dave Elswick, Interview With Author, November 27, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Lisa Liddane, "Hundreds Join KFI Cash Mob to Keep Toy Shop Afloat," *The Orange County Register*, August 1, 2012; Amy Senk, "Cash Mob Infusion Keeps O.C. Toy Store Open For Now," *The Orange County Register*, August 5, 2012.

medium. Station owner Robert Hauck, whose station aired Limbaugh's syndicated show from its inception, spoke for many in the radio industry when he proclaimed that Limbaugh "singlehandedly [kept] AM alive."111 Limbaugh got his break in 1988 when Ed McLaughlin brokered a deal for him to broadcast a two hour show on WABC in New York<sup>112</sup> and a second two hour nationally syndicated show (that did not air in New York) that stations could acquire through the barter method. The barter method allowed stations to air Limbaugh's show for free in exchange for a number of advertising spots during the program. This method made Limbaugh attractive to many smaller stations (like Hauck's) that were struggling to survive. 113 For example, Scott Hennen programmed KCNN in Grand Forks North Dakota, turning it into the first talk station in North Dakota in 1986. The station initially had one hour of local programming and the rest of the day featured syndicated hosts like Owen Spann.<sup>114</sup> After a convincing sell from McLaughlin and his affiliate relations man Lee Vanden Handel, Hennen became one of the original executives to add Limbaugh's program to his lineup. Within days, Limbaugh had provoked reactions that no one had ever seen before. These reactions led to talk radio skyrocketing, and remonetized what had become a worthless AM radio band. 115

Only the new satellite technology, which allowed a small station like WHKY in Hickory, North Carolina to air Limbaugh's show, made this transformation possible. WHKY was small

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Greg Hamilton, "Minister Longs to Wrestle For Rush," *St Petersburg Times*, March 21, 1994; Hennen, Interview With Author; Goldstein, Interview With Author; Jon Sinton, email message to author, April 25, 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Limbaugh broadcast the WABC show for free in exchange for WABC airing national commercials, which allowed McLaughlin to tell advertisers that Limbaugh's program aired in the number one market in the country; Rush Limbaugh, "Ed McLaughlin, Founder of EIB," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, August 1, 2008, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/ed\_mclaughlin\_founder\_of\_eib">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/ed\_mclaughlin\_founder\_of\_eib</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Colford, Rush Limbaugh Story, 72-88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Limbaugh inherited Spann's satellite time after ABC ended its' nationally syndicated network. As part of McLaughlin's compensation package when he left ABC Radio, ABC allowed him access to the satellite time Spann had been using to syndicate a show of his choosing. Rush Limbaugh, "Ed McLaughlin, Founder of EIB."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Hennen, Interview With Author; Hennen, e-mail message to author, February 1, 2013.

dollar operation—charging eight dollars per minute for advertising time. When the station brought Limbaugh to Hickory for a broadcast in 1989, he used a jury-rigged mic stand and the station's only set of headphones. The station's sales manager, who produced the show, had to use a Walkman that he brought from home to listen, and his wife, who screened calls, had to run down the hall to give Limbaugh a paper list of callers. The station's technical capacity lagged so significantly that when Limbaugh started taking calls, feedback screamed in his earphones, and he and the callers could not hear each other. He resorted to talking into both his microphone and a telephone handset simultaneously. The small operation was such that, in spite of broadcasting on 178 stations, Limbaugh had to announce that the Hickory Baptist Church had cancelled its pinto-bean dinner because of poor weather! This arrangement in no way resembled Limbaugh's usual setup in New York, where a computer screen contained information about callers and a glass wall separated Limbaugh from his producer. WHKY and other small stations like it would not have been to afford a talk format without syndicated programming.

#### Limbaugh's Allure

John Mainelli agreed to add Limbaugh to WABC's lineup because he found the host to be humorous and thoughtful. He was looking for entertaining hosts, and Limbaugh's "PC-subversiveness," not his conservative perspective, attracted Mainelli. 117 Controversy and "PC-subversiveness" also drew many of Mainelli's peers to Limbaugh's show. For example, Limbaugh's "outrageous behavior," especially the "caller abortions," in which Limbaugh would "abort" liberal callers by playing a vacuum cleaner sound effect and screams to drown out the caller, enticed Chattanooga programer Bill Luckett. Luckett knew that this behavior would

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Tim Grieve, "ON THE ROAD WITH AMERICA'S MOST-LISTENED-TO TALK-SHOW HOST (HOLD THE PINTO BEANS, PLEASE)," *The Sacramento Bee*, December 17, 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Mainelli email message to author, October 20, 2010.

offend many Chattanoogans, and he welcomed the controversy because he wanted to shake things up.<sup>118</sup> In addition to the caller abortions, Limbaugh featured updates on specific issues introduced by theme music. For example, a mix of Andy Williams' Born Free, machine gun blasts, mortar explosions, and animals screeching introduced an animal rights update, indicating Limbaugh's scorn for animal rights activists and their cause. 119 Similarly he introduced updates about openly-gay Democratic Congressman Barney Frank with a version of the 1950s song, My Boy Lollipop. Limbaugh targeted Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) with a parody called the Philanderer, which featured a Kennedy impersonator singing about carousing to the tune of Dion's *The Wanderer* (among the lyrics: "Where pretty girls are, well you'll know I'm around. I kiss 'em and I love 'em, cause to me they're all the same. I get so gosh darn hammered, I don't even know their names, cause I'm a Philanderer, yes a Philanderer, I sleep around, around, around, around. Well my views are on the left, got a bimbo on the right. Only God'll know where I'll be passing out tonight."120 Limbaugh also would occasionally cover his microphone with a condom, which he claimed protected his listeners from any evil words that he might enunciate. He dubbed this practice "safe talk." Limbaugh's show even had its own vernacular—people who died had assumed room temperature. This brash style captivated even staunch liberals.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Eric Morgenthaler, "A Common Touch: `Dittoheads' All Over Make Rush Limbaugh Superstar of the Right --- Some Tune In for the Humor; The Serious Ones Think He's the Voice of Reason --- Packing Them In at the NRA," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 1993, A1.

 $<sup>{}^{119}\</sup>text{ "Animal Rights Update," }\textit{EIB Updates and PSAs}, \\ \underline{\text{http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos?uri=channels/456319}}.$ 

<sup>120</sup> Peter Boyer, "Bull Rush," *Vanity Fair* 5, no. 5 (May 1992): 158; "Barney Frank Update Theme: My Boy Lollipop," *EIB Updates and PSAs*, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos?uri=channels/456319">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos?uri=channels/456319</a>; "The Philanderer: Teddy the Swimmer," *EIB Updates and PSAs*, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos/38/27071">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos/38/27071</a> or <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos/">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos/</a>. See also "Rush's Massive Parody Archive," <a href="http://webtest1.rushlimbaugh.com/home/parody.member.html">http://webtest1.rushlimbaugh.com/home/parody.member.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> "Rush Limbaugh's America," *PBS Frontline*, season 13, episode 11, directed by Marian Marzynski, produced by Steve Talbot, aired February 28, 1995, accessed via Youtube, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWD">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWD</a> F6sZ5dE.

Limbaugh's audience and the number of stations on which his program aired grew astronomically during the early 1990s. Limbaugh's syndicated show began on somewhere between fifty-seven and eighty-seven stations in 1988, with an average audience of 299,000 listeners. By the end of 1989, the program aired on 178 stations. By 1993, Limbaugh had achieved stardom; his program aired on 610 stations and had 17 million listeners per week. Limbaugh created such demand that McLaughlin began charging a cash fee in addition to the four minutes of advertising time per hour that stations paid to air Limbaugh's program. Over time, Limbaugh's success allowed his syndicator to place other conditions upon affiliates, including airing a Morning Update complete with its own commercial during stations' lucrative morning drive time show, and airing a Best Of Rush show during the day on the weekends. No other host has sufficient popularity to warrant such stringent and costly conditions.

Mainelli believed that programmers mistakenly concluded that Limbaugh's popularity derived from his conservatism, failing to understand that his success actually derived from his unique ability to entertain. As radio industry journalist Robert Unmacht described it, Limbaugh could "talk about trash can lids and make it a fun story." Other industry insiders, including Unmacht and programmer Bill Hess, implicitly agreed with Mainelli by arguing that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> See footnote 2; Peter Viles, "AM Radio's One Man Comeback (Talk Show Host Rush Limbaugh), *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 4, 1992, 55; Peter Viles, "Talk Explodes in National Syndication (Special Report: Radio Syndication)," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 17, 1993, 34; Henry Allen, "Media to the Left! Media to the Right! Rush Limbaugh, On the Republicans' Wavelength," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 1992, c1; Morgenthaler, "A Common Touch"; Lewis Grossberger, "*The Rush Hours*," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Peter Viles, "Cash for Rush: Most Stations Opting to Pay (EFM Media Charges Fees For Carrying 'The Rush Limbaugh Show')," *Broadcasting and Cable*, June 21, 1993; Michael Harrison, "Interview: Edward F. McLaughlin," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 145 (January/February 2004): 18-23, 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Holland Cooke, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> Mainelli, Email-message to Author, October 20, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Sam Howe Verhovek, "Out of Politics, But Still Talking, Radio Style," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1995.

boring hosts failed regardless of their political perspectives.<sup>127</sup> In fact, both McLaughlin and Limbaugh's Chief of Staff Kit Carson argued that Limbaugh would have been equally successful had he been a liberal.<sup>128</sup> Limbaugh, himself, offered a slightly different view. He believed that he would not have been as successful as a liberal, but only, "for the simple reason that liberals don't laugh about things. I have a sense of humor."

Overall, Limbaugh possessed all of the attributes that talk radio programmers looked for in an ideal host. Valerie Geller wanted hosts who informed, entertained, inspired, and engaged. David Rimmer considered a good host to be someone with whom you wanted to spend time and who kept you sitting in the car in your driveway listening. Gary Burns looked for opinionated and outspoken individuals. Former ABC Vice President of talk programming John McConnell wanted smart and unpredictable hosts who had energy. Robin Bertolucci targeted entertaining and compelling personalities. Dave Elswick searched for passionate hosts, who knew what they believed and why they believed it, while still understanding that radio was an entertainment medium. Tom Becka aimed to provoke genuine emotion from his listeners. Many nationally or locally successful hosts from across the ideological spectrum, including Stephanie Miller, Michael Smerconish, Becka, Handel, and others also fit these descriptions, proving that these traits, not simply his conservatism, propelled Limbaugh to success (conservatives who lacked

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Howe Verhovek, "Out of Politics But Still Talking."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> Gossberger, "The Rush Hours;" Carson later clarified that he did not mean to minimize the nation's conservative streak into which his boss successfully tapped; Sam Howe Verhovek, "The Media Business: Talk Radio Gets A Spirited New Voice From the Left," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1994, D7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> John McGuire, "The Loudest Limb on the Family Tree Radio's Rush Limbaugh Is the 'Big Mouth' Branch of a Solid Old Cape Girardeau Family," *The St Louis Post Dispatch*, September 27, 1992.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Geller, interview with author; Rimmer, interview with author; Burns, interview with author; John McConnell, Interview with Author, December 2, 2012; Bertolucci, Interview with Author, October 17, 2012; Elswick, interview with author; Becka, interview with author; Berry and Sobieraj offer a similar description of good hosts. See *Outrage Industry*, 114-116.

these qualities, including Fred Thompson, Morton Downey Jr, and Mike Huckabee, did not last long in the business). Market research conducted by some of Limbaugh's early affiliates provided further evidence that his popularity derived from these traits, not from his conservatism. This research revealed that, at the time, Limbaugh attracted a fairly highly percentage of liberal listeners.<sup>131</sup>

Additionally, at the time, Limbaugh's in your face, opinion driven, conservative show was unique and a breath of fresh air. Most talk radio shows were mellow, sunny, and interview based. Talk stations aired everything from cooking shows to pet advice shows. For example, when San Diego station 690 XTRA adopted a talk format in 1988, the lineup included a local conservative morning host, followed by a local medical advice show, followed by Limbaugh, and finally a local psychologist. Stylistically, host Doug McIntyre noted that Limbaugh was the first person to really take the performance art of a top 40 DJ and apply it to politics. He covered politics as if he were pitching music. Madditionally, Mainelli argued that before Limbaugh entered syndication, "PC-subversiveness," which included edginess, stereotype based humor, inappropriate and outrageous comments, etc., existed primarily in major markets. Several of Limbaugh's early affiliates, KFI in Los Angeles and WLS in Chicago, actually developed entire edgy or more stimulating talk formats, believing that to be their only opportunity to challenge popular, but mellow, talk stations KABC and WGN respectively. After conducting focus groups,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> George Oliva, Interview With Author; Valerie Geller, Interview With Author.

<sup>132</sup> Robert P. Laurence, "Still awake after 'Late Night'? Now there's 'Later', The San Diego Union, August 22, 1988.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> McIntyre, interview with author; Alan Colmes, interview with author; Gabe Hobbs, interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> John Mainelli, e-mail messages to author, October 20, 2010 & November 21, 2010; A 1984 *Time* Magazine article discussed the rise in outrageous and controversial programming. Most of the examples in the article came from other major markets, such as Miami and Denver, which reinforced Mainelli's argument that most of the country did not have this sort of programming; Richard Lacayo, "Audiences Love to Hate Them," *Time Magazine* 124, no. 2: 86-88.

KFI executive George Oliva found that KABC owned the keys to the audience, but had a sliver of weakness that could be exploited by a more stimulating talk format in which hosts took clear stances, willingly stepped on toes, and used humor to the point of irreverence.<sup>135</sup>

In fact, this edgy style represented one of the few commonalities between Limbaugh and Howard Stern, the other transcendent spoken word radio talent of their generation. The content of their programs differed substantially— Stern only occasionally discussed politics and his program often explored crude and sexual topics. Though both targeted men, Limbaugh and Stern played to vastly different audiences—Stern's program aired predominately on FM rock stations. Yet, stylistically, both pushed boundaries, shared blunt opinions, and used irreverence and absurdity—listeners never knew quite what they would hear when tuning in.

Indeed, the best conservative radio hosts made their political agenda clear, but they did so in an entertaining way, and they understood the need to prioritize entertainment. For example, Limbaugh developed the environmentalist wacko method to predict NFL games because he heard that female listeners and issue oriented male listeners had no interest in listening to him pick games. He analyzed the 2005 NFC and AFC championship games by explaining that Patriots brought racism, sexism, homophobia and bigotry to America, Steelers were a bunch of polluters, the dead white guys who brought all of these bad trends to the nation adopted the Eagle as their official bird, and the Falcon could be captured and turned into a pet and understood modern man. He picked the Falcons and the Steelers to win, the Steelers because the native

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Tradup, Interview with Author; Oliva, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> Susan Douglas depicted Stern as someone who "hated liberal politics and who insisted that unreconstructed white men get back on top... He was especially determined to defy the liberal sensibilities about race, gender, physical disabilities, and sexual orientation that had emerged from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (304). Yet, even Douglas admitted that Stern had a significant liberal strain. In fact, she argued that he possessed an "incoherent combination of libertarian, liberal, and conservative sensibilities;" Douglas, *Listening In*, 302-306.

Americans who had a birth right to the nation would root for the Steelers and the Falcons because they were an easy pick.<sup>137</sup> Thus, he used the fun prism of football to espouse his political viewpoint. Similarly, on Election Day in 1992, Limbaugh aired a parody entitled, "Taxula, starring Bill Clinton." In the parody, Count Taxula, along with his faithful servant Algore, sucked the lifeblood out of every American taxpayer making over \$36,000 per year. He used his slick character and charisma to hypnotize his victims. He slept in the daytime, and prowled at night (A female voice cooed, "oh Willie, do that again.") The parody conveyed many of President Bush's talking points, but did so in an entertaining fashion.<sup>138</sup>

Many conservative hosts employed nicknames, sound effects, humorous imitations, and parodies to express scorn for liberals. They also used popular music, usually either rock or country, ranging from Nirvana to Martina McBride, as bumper music heading into or out of commercial. Limbaugh called former Senator Alan Cranston, "The Cadaver," former Speaker of the House Jim Wright, "Fort Worthless" Jim Wright, Democratic House Leader Dick Gephardt, "Little Dick," and South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, with whom he disagreed on immigration, Lindsay Grahamnesty. Laura Ingraham referred to comedian, and now Senator, Al Franken as Franken Fraud. She described his laugh as sounding like a duck on crack. Ingraham also referred to Senator Kennedy as the "Senior Balloon." On a 2005 show, she ran a montage of him discussing waterboarding and the country being awash in red ink. She overlaid these remarks with sounds of splashing and then suggested that Kennedy avoid water analogies, in an obvious reference to the Chappaquiddick drowning of aide Mary Jo Kopechne (many

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, January 21, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress Talk Radio Digital Archive, which is only accessible through computers at the Library.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> See Paul Shanklin, "Count Taxula," <a href="http://mfile.akamai.com/5020/wma/rushlimb.download.akamai.com/5020/wshanklin\_archives/Taxula.asx">http://mfile.akamai.com/5020/wma/rushlimb.download.akamai.com/5020/wshanklin\_archives/Taxula.asx</a>; For the specific broadcast see, Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 3, 1992, <a href="http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/Limb">http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/Limb</a>

conservative hosts referred to Kennedy as the Swimmer). On the same show, Ingraham referred to Senator John Kerry (D-MA) as Lurch, and played the Adams family theme song as his theme. Additionally, she played audio of President Clinton explaining that he was a Democrat because of the party's belief in shared benefits and opportunities. Ingraham commented over the clip that Clinton also believed in "shared women," and had a little too much sharing going on in his White House. Similarly, conservative host Michael Medved (a former film critic) enlightened his listeners on rapper DMX's claim that he was raped, which threatened his marriage. Medved noted that Republicans like gospel and country music, whereas Democrats like pop stars like DMX. He continued that Bill Clinton should have used that excuse because, "Monica's a big girl." He then played sound clips of Clinton saying hot dog and just stop it. Hous, most successful conservative hosts provided entertaining, high energy, "PC-subversive" programs that often pushed boundaries.

### Why Conservatives Like Talk Radio

Prospering in radio required humor and entertainment value, but Limbaugh and his peers also thrived because their combination of entertainment and conservatism connected with a potential audience of disillusioned conservatives—an audience that no one knew existed before Limbaugh began broadcasting nationally. These Americans believed that liberal intellectuals and politicians increasingly threatened their values and their vision for America through advocacy of permissive cultural policies, like legalized abortion, and a preference towards minorities through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>139</sup> Laura Ingraham, The Laura Ingraham Show, February 11, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Michael Medved, The Michael Medved Show, September 22, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

policies like affirmative action. Attorney Augustus Agate spoke for these Americans in demanding "government has to say, 'This is enough. We're bankrupting the country (through welfare programs).' . . . I'm giving up a third to 40 percent of my salary, and I'm living one step better than people who aren't working."<sup>141</sup>

Cultural developments including gratuitous violence and sex on television programs like Married with Children and Miami Vice, music with coarse lyrics, such as Madonna's Like a Prayer or Van Halen's Hot With Teacher, AIDS, the crack epidemic, a ten percent teenage pregnancy rate, and half of marriages ending in divorce also troubled these Americans. They felt powerless to protect their children and grandchildren from increasing exposure to violence, sex, drugs, and alcohol. They also felt estranged from government and the political process, which they believed failed to address society's ills. Lowell Henderson, a Louisiana architect, explained their alienation. "You look around at a country where they've got four-letter words on bumper stickers and you can't take your children to a movie and you're scared to send them to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>141</sup> Jonathan Kaufman,"The Color Line A Generation After The Civil Rights Movement, Blacks And Whites Seem To Know Each Other Better. But In Many Ways They Seem To Like Each Other Less. The First Of Two Parts Of A Journey Across A Divided America," *The Boston Globe*, June 18, 1989; In his 1987 analysis of Boston talk radio and its listeners, Murray Levin noted that the blue collar callers on Boston radio despised social welfare, affirmative action, and secular humanism. They believed that the moral basis of the nation had gone sour; Murray B. Levin, *Talk Radio and the American Dream* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), xiv.

<sup>142</sup> In his 1991 book *Culture* Wars, James Davison Hunter identified these Americans as traditionalists or orthodox. He described them as viewing the traditions and achievements of the past as the foundation and guide to the challenges of the present. They believed in transcendent authority and sought a reinvigoration of the noblest ideas of civilization; See Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There A Culture War: A Dialogue on Values and American Public* Life (Washington, D.C.: Pew Forum/Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 2; 14; Richard Harrington, "The Capitol Hill Rock War Emotions Run High As Musicians Confront Parents Group at Hearing," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1985; Anita Manning, "Teens and Sex in the Age of AIDS, *USA Today*, October 3, 1988; Curt Suplee, "Sex in the 90s," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1989; Irene Sege, "Teen-Age Pregnancy: An American Problem Promiscuous U.S. Teen-Agers More Likely to Get Pregnant Than Are Their Counterparts in Other Developed Countries, *The Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1986; Stuart Elliot, "Advertisers In The Line of Fire; 'New Puritans' Launch Attack On 'Trash' TV," *USA Today*, March 29, 1989; "Do We Value Our Children Growing Up In A Changing World Series: Do We Value Our Children: Part 1 Of 3, *The Record*, March 29, 1987.

school... And it comes to you that the government shouldn't let those things happen to our country."<sup>143</sup> In President Reagan, with his program of traditional values, less government, and black and white thinking these alienated conservatives found a political champion who addressed their frustrations, at least rhetorically.<sup>144</sup>

Limbaugh connected with this audience because their values informed his dissection of current events. Fan Nathan Willis listened to Limbaugh to hear his moral values, which he considered to be "dead in America." On one 1992 show Limbaugh posited:

Kids are far more aware than you might think and they are far more astute than you might think about these kinds of things. With the constant barrage that kids get in our dominant media culture. On MTV, in the movies they go see, these slasher and hacker movies. In the records and songs they listen to. You may say that this stuff isn't damaging. But I'm telling you that it is. When we can show you statistically that in 1971 the number of teenage girls with multiple sex partners was 29% and today it's over, what, 60%, some 20 years later. The statistics that we gave you yesterday. That's a difference from then till now. You might say, ah, every generation has its music that's, you know, perhaps destructive. In my generation, the destructive music people thought was the Beatles. If you look at the lyrics to the Beatles songs: Love Love Me Do, I want to Hold Your Hand or whatever it is, I saw Her Standing There. The Beatles did get into psychedelic stuff and so forth but you can't play Beatles music today and compare it to Ice-Tea and Two Live Crew and all these kinds of things. And this permissiveness intolerance which says we have this 1st Amendment and under it anybody can do anything they want and there shouldn't be limitations and we have all this aberrant behavior going on under the name of art - or in the name of art, I don't think that we can then sit around and ask why are kids are taking guns to schools and killing each other. When the solution is put up a metal detector, and then when you want to put up a metal detector, certain groups like the ACLU say no that's a violation of search and seizure you can't do that. We can't teach 'em values except homosexual values in school in New York City. But you can't teach—you can't put the Ten Commandments in school even though it's great advice, it's remarkably instructive, and there no better ten things to teach people how to live with one another than the 10 commandments. You don't need the children of the rainbow curriculum. You don't need Heather has two mommies or Daddy has a roommate to teach people how to live with each other. Ten commandments does it. It's all right there. But you can't do that b/c it has a religious foundation and SO it's not constitutional, it's not qualified. So when kids start hacking each other to death, the answers are plain and simple, the difficult thing is to accept it and to proceed on the road to solving the problems

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> T.R. Reid, "Robertson Faded, But Born-Again Christians Remain Potent Force; Evangelical Bloc Emerges As Key Element In Republican Drive to the White House," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1988.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Susan Douglas asserted that part of Reagan's appeal to these Americans was his reassertion of masculinity. I believe his conservatism and optimism were the primary appeal, but the two are interrelated. See Douglas, *Listening In*, 290-291.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Based upon their interviews with consumers of "outrage media," Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj label hosts "supportive cheerleaders for and defenders of the values that fans hold dear;" Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*,
141; Amy Bernstein, "Show Time in the Rush Room," *U.S. News and World Report* 115, no. 7 (August 16, 1993):
36.

based on the real problem, which too many of us neglect to admit or recognize. And that's what I think. But you have to admit the problem. 146

Many of these Americans resented a "liberal establishment," consisting of the news media, Hollywood, the academy, and the Democratic Party, which harbored bias against their viewpoints, ridiculed their values, and contributed to the degradation of American culture. As Beverly Shelton of the Traditional Values Coalition complained, television executives called LGBT groups to determine the acceptability of a program, whereas religious groups had no such liaison. 147 A 1987 Pew poll found that 62% of Republicans and 48% of Democrats thought that the press demonstrated bias towards liberals. 148 Even after Reagan's rise, these aggrieved Americans lacked a widespread medium through which to vent against the ridicule and scorn they felt from the liberal establishment. Many of them also felt isolated or ashamed to express their views, which the establishment had branded politically incorrect, because they did not want to be labeled bigoted, heartless, or foolish. 149 As one consumer of "outrage media" told Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Soberiei in 2010, "It's just harder to be conservative because it's easy to call someone a racist...I can tell you exactly what [my views] are, and some people will sit there and go, 'You're just wrong, you're conservative, you just hate people. You just hate Black people or poor people or gay people, or whatever."150

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> The Rush Limbaugh Show, "The Segment," recorded by the Paley Center for the Media, catalog number 12583R, <a href="http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22Rush+Limbaugh">http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22Rush+Limbaugh</a> %22&f=all&c=all&advanced=1&p=1&item=RB:12583.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Jan Norman, "Too Hot to Handle? Outraged Viewers Carry Protests to TV Program Advertisers," *The Orange County Register*, April 23, 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> Jason Zengerle, "Talking Back," *The New Republic*, February 16, 2004, 19-25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> See Susan Douglas, *Listening In*, 291-293; When Berry and Soberiaj asked conservative fans of outrage media about their willingness to discuss politics, each respondent mentioned the risk of being accused of racism if they did. They were also wary of being judged as people because of their views. Sobieraj and Berry, *Outrage Industry*, 146-48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>150</sup> Sobieraj and Berry, The Outrage Industry, 147.

Conservative talk radio was precisely the kind of anti-establishment medium through which these Americans could become reconnected to the political process and could express their views. The virtual anonymity offered by talk radio provided an opportunity to vent and freely express their views to like-minded people who would understand and sympathize, without being identified and scorned by spouses, friends, bosses, customers, or neighbors, who might disagree.<sup>151</sup> Talk radio also provided an avenue through which they could make their voices heard by elected officials.

These Americans perceived subtle and subconscious bias and contempt in nominally objective reporting. They found their perspective missing from the news, which was reported through a much more progressive lens than the one through which they viewed the world. As conservative host and former San Diego Mayor Roger Hedgecock noted, the newsmen of the day all came out of a certain mindset in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s: they opposed Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, they supported JFK, they supported Civil Rights, and they generally believed their worldview to be correct. But many conservatives disliked the assumptions that these reporters made about people and the country. For example, they resented what they perceived to be the press's opposition to the Vietnam War. 154 In fact, as Howard Kurtz

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>151</sup> Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj explain that "outrage media" provide "safe political spaces for fans. In these contexts, fans experience none of the discomfort we associate with face-to-face political conversation." Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage* Industry, 127; Kurtz, "Radio Daze A Day With the Country's Masters of Gab;" Levinson, "America's Yakking It Up."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> In *Listening In*, Susan Douglas explained that disgust with the media helped propel talk radio forward. However, she seemed to assume that the disillusionment that talk radio's listeners felt towards the mainstream media stemmed from the lack of depth and quality of mainstream coverage as it transitioned more towards sensationalism, soundbites, and horserace coverage. In reality, this perceived political bias and the absence of stories that they felt to be important and underreported for ideological reasons disgusted this audience. Douglas, *Listening In*, 299-301; 307-08; 310.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Elswick, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>154</sup> Roger Hedgecock, Interview with author.

explained, conservatives believed that mainstream journalists, "share the same assumptions about government, abortion, religion and just about everything else, failing to realize how out of step they are with the country." Conservative hosts Lars Larson (a former Peabody Award winning journalist) and Hugh Hewitt experienced this groupthink and liberal collective worldview during their time in television newsrooms. <sup>156</sup>

Neither Larson, nor Hewitt, believed that reporters intentionally biased or distorted their reporting. Rather, a common cultural background, for which Larson and Hewitt blamed the selection process that trained journalists, shaped how reporters perceived their world. Hewitt found that reporters came from elite universities that shared a similar cultural background and ideology (as he put it, graduates knew what the *Harvard Crimson* was). Journalism schools taught reporters to limit this "self selected ideology," but inevitably it affected story selection. Larson broadened the critique to include all universities, but he made the same point: journalists almost all had four year college degrees, universities were liberal places, and people who graduated from these institutions socialized with other likeminded people from similar backgrounds. Their worldview affected the stories that reporters covered—both whether something was news and if so, why—and the questions they asked while reporting those stories. Larson offered the example of police finding a gun in the house of a man who had been arrested. While this discovery might scare or concern a liberal, many people from a conservative milieu might be non-plussed and find possession of a gun to be irrelevant.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Party Poopers; Conservative Pundits Who Break Ranks Find Themselves on the Wrong Side of the Right," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 1997, B1.

<sup>156</sup> Hugh Hewitt, Interview with author; Lars Larson, Interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Ibid.

The push towards more investigate and advocacy journalism during the 1970s further fueled the perception of anti-conservative press bias. 158 As Dave Elswick explained, reporting transformed from covering both sides of a story to finding a story that advanced a journalist's preferred side of an important issue. Elswick believed that the mainstream media only presented conservative arguments when the media personality wished to explain the fallacy of the argument. Indeed, JD Hayworth believed that reporters allowed the left to set the terms, frames, and definitions of the political debate. For example, the press discussed voter ID laws in the context of "voter suppression," even though the bipartisan Baker-Carter committee recommended that voters show photo IDs, and Democrats required reporters and delegates to show IDs at their 2012 convention. 159

Conservatives also detected a snideness and condescension behind this subtle bias. They believed that elites and liberals, including most reporters, considered themselves to be smarter than people with traditional values. Congressman Hayworth once exited a meeting of the conservative Republican Study Committee behind two reporters, and he overheard one remark to the other that he had had to see "what the wingnuts are up to." Limbaugh constantly reminded his listeners (and TV viewers) that liberals considered them to be stupid and ignorant. As he explained, "liberal Democrats assign all of their defeats to the fact that you're stupid. You just don't understand what's good for you, and when you vote for Republicans or like what Republicans want to do, somehow you've been tricked--slick marketing and packaging." 161

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>158</sup> Elswick, Interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> Hayworth, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>160</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion On Budget Cuts At The City University of New York, Animal Rights Protestors or PETA, The Republican Contract With America, Democratic Views on Social Issues and the Republican Tax Cut," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired April 5, 1995 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

Finally, conservatives believed that the news media held conservative politicians to a different standard than liberal ones. Off-color humor might get a conservative days of bad press, but the press ignored liberals' off-color jokes. Republican political consultant Greg Stevens summarized the link between the rise of talk radio and this perceived bias, noting that talk radio took off, "as the American people got tired of yelling back at talking heads on the evening television news." 163

Limbaugh directly addressed this bias and he shared and articulated the feelings of these conservatives in a way that no other media outlet had previously done." As programmer David Hall put it, Limbaugh was "always willing to turn someone's sacred cow into two steaks and a burger." In 1993, Limbaugh explained to the *Wall Street Journal*:

I think the vast majority of people in this country live their lives as conservatives... "They may not vote that way, but they live their lives that way. They want a good education for their kids, they don't want a whole lot of government in their lives, they want prosperity and contentment and happiness. They basically want to feel good about themselves....But we live in a society where the dominant media culture makes fun of the things they believe in -- God and country and monogamy. I'm perceived as one of the few national voices that stand up for what so many people feel is not represented in the media." 165

To the *Washington Post*'s Henry Allen, Limbaugh "was the right man to articulate the resentments of the liberal haters of the '80s - a lonely small-town guy who was just as smart and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>162</sup> For example, Limbaugh highlighted the contrast between the lack of outrage when Democratic Congressman Sherrod Brown (OH) suggested reopening Pennsylvania Avenue (which had been closed to increase the President's security) and the way in which Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) had been pilloried for joking that if President Clinton came to North Carolina he would need bodyguards; Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion of Homosexuals and Gays Visiting the White House; Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley's Interview; And President Clinton's Announcement on How He Plans to Balance the Budget," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired June 15, 1995 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>162</sup> Greg Stevens, "Cybercampaigning: Why It Promises More Than Just Geek Votes," *Roll Call*, August 3, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>164</sup> Hall, Interview with Author; Morgenthaler, "A Common Touch."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>165</sup> Morgenthaler, "A Common Touch."

funny as the people who sneered at lonely small-town guys. He put music and sound effects together with his rants about political correctness and ideological nitpicking."<sup>166</sup>

Limbaugh's entertaining defense of their shared values struck a chord with millions of listeners. As Jerry "Boogie" Gallant, a California oil-field worker, explained, "he is articulate to the common man like me. Most of us out there are working people, and we get tired of getting blamed for everything." Garrett Headrick, a fifty-eight year old fan, described Limbaugh as "a man who expresses my sentiments, and does it with wit and humor. I appreciate the clarity of his thinking. And when he articulates my thoughts, I get a sense of not being alone. Now we have someone who can speak for us, against the mean-spirited nature and intolerance of the left." 168

As host Kevin Horrigan observed, Limbaugh and other conservative hosts entertained, but they also made listeners like Headrick and Gallant feel good about themselves and their political beliefs. Instead of the guilt and scorn that they felt from the "liberal media," these listeners now had a forum in which they could proudly espouse their beliefs. Head Boortz explained that, "If I'm tapping anything...it's the frustration of people who have something to say at work or home or in some social setting and just can't do it. I do it for them. I don't take prisoners." He he liberals pounced on these sentiments, hosts doubled down with glee, giving their listeners a true champion for whom to root. In his autobiography, Boortz ended a recitation of how his commentary about the Virginia Tech massacre had provoked outrage with, "I started counting down the days until I once again said something that many people were thinking, but

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>166</sup> Allen, "Media to the Left! Media to the Right."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>167</sup> Morgantheler, "A Common Touch."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>168</sup> Steven V. Roberts, "What a Rush," U.S. News and World Report 115, no. 7 (August 16, 1993): 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> Bill Lambrecht, "Radio Activity; In a Big Rush, Voters Take Their Anger From Airwaves to Ballot Box, Boosting GOP Fortune," *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 13, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>170</sup> Coppola, "Neal Boortz."

were afraid to express, and the howling dogs of the left-wing media would once again rise up in outrage."<sup>171</sup> One caller begged Bob Grant, "Please, please don't leave us. You are our only voice."<sup>172</sup>

Political talk radio appealed to these Americans because it essentially mimicked their dinner table conversations. Although many popular hosts focused primarily on politics, almost all of them also talked about the news of the day. That might be a major local story, or it could be the latest celebrity, sports, legal or business news. Yet, hosts conducted these discussions and interviews from their conservative perspective. For example, when Boortz discussed a teenage driver who crashed her car at 1:30 AM and killed her sister, he focused on the overindulgence of buying sixteen year old kids cars, and he blamed the accident on bad parenting because the parents permitted the teens to be out driving at 1:30 AM. On the next day, Boortz lambasted a principal who claimed not to have seen a teacher's request to allow a marine to speak to students who had corresponded with him while he was deployed, and subsequently refused to allow him to speak without the proper authorization. Boortz used the incident to explain to his listeners that, "I think what you've got here is some middle school principal with her butt on her shoulder about the military and what we're doing in Iraq. Some liberal who, by God, was going to make sure that no U.S. Marine came to her school and talked to her students. Then she claimed not to have seen the form when the newspaper came around." Boortz concluded that once again

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>171</sup> Neal Boortz, *Maybe I Should Just Shut Up and Go Away* (Franklin, Tennessee: Carpenter's Son Publishing, 2012), Location 2401.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>172</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Talk Radio Hosts Waking Up on the Right Side of the Bed," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 1994.

government schools showed no love for the American military, which fit with his opposition to public schools and support for the military.<sup>173</sup>

Thus, talk radio hosts discussed apolitical topics, ranging from how to handle mosquitos, to white meat or dark meat, to popular movies, to their own travel woes, to the proper location for new stoplights, but these discussions always reflected their cultural perspective, as would dinner table discussions.<sup>174</sup> As Sacramento Host Joe Getty explained, he and partner Jack Armstrong had a "human relationship with their listeners." They talked to their "friends" (listeners) about many topics, including politics. Yet, Armstrong and Getty estimated that their show ranged from 70%-75% political on a heavy news day to less than 40-50% political on a slower news day.<sup>175</sup>

The economic developments during the 1980s and the Democratic Party's response to them made talk radio's conservative and politically incorrect discourse especially alluring to middle and lower middle class white men. <sup>176</sup> Between 1982 and 1994, the real earnings for white men with high school diplomas and white male high school dropouts declined 9.1% and 22% respectively. By contrast, the mean earnings for white men with advanced degrees rose by 24.3%. Minority males with low educational attainment experienced an even more severe earnings drop, but as Larry Letich argued in the *Washington Post*, minorities had a much easier time getting educated progressives to care about this decline and to view it as the byproduct of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>173</sup> Neal Boortz, *The Neal Boortz Show*, May 31, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>174</sup>This list is a partial compilation of topics that conservative hosts mentioned to me in interviews or that I heard discussed on archived shows to which I listened.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>175</sup> In fact, Getty compared their irreverent mix of fun and politics to his family's breakfast table discussion. Joe Getty, Interview With Author, February 13, 2013; Jack Armstrong, Interview With Author, February 25, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>176</sup> Even before Limbaugh's show began to air nationally in 1988, Murray Levin described talk radio as the province of proletarian discontent and the only mass medium available to the underclass; Levin, *Talk Radio and the American Dream*, xiii.

systemic injustice. By contrast, the high-school educated white man inspired condescension, even contempt, among the "college educated, privileged and politically correct" population. Blue collar men found a champion in Limbaugh, with whom they could commiserate, from whom they received respect, and who, unlike liberals, did not brand their frustrations bigoted or ignorant.<sup>177</sup> In fact, Limbaugh frequently railed against Affirmative Action, mocked the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and highlighted some of the more extreme and hypocritical statements made by Civil Rights leaders.<sup>178</sup>

Table 1

biennial *Pew* surveys between 1998 and 2010 found that men Limbaugh Audience By Gender constituted an average of almost 56% of Limbaugh's audience (see Year Percentage Male Table 1 for a survey by survey breakdown). <sup>179</sup> A 2004 Annenberg 1998 66.7% study put the number even higher at 66.6% male. 180 Former Reagan 2000 N/A speech writer Peggy Noonan observed that Limbaugh talked to 2002 49.6% 2004 53.1% American men in a way that they had hungered to be talked to about 2006 54.7% politics, thereby filling a void that no one knew existed. Not only 2008 66.0% 2010 52.2% economic alienation, but also cultural alienation over the societal

Talk radio was, in fact, largely a bastion for men. Analysis of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>177</sup> Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj also mention that "outrage media" consumers felt as though hosts valued them; Berry and Sobieraj, Outrage Industry, 141; Larry Letich, "Why White Men Jump; Democrats Keep Ignoring the High School Class," The Washington Post, October 30, 1994; For an explanation of the roots of this sentiment see Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) and Rick Perlstein, Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America (New York: Scribner, 2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>178</sup> Allison Perlman details how Limbaugh appropriated the mantle of civil rights for conservatives, in part by conflating race consciousness with racism and color blindness with racial progress. Limbaugh argues that liberals, not conservatives, insisted on seeing race at every turn; See Allison Perlman, "Rush Limbaugh and the Problem of the Color Line," in Cinema Journal 51, no. 4 (summer 2012): 198-204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>179</sup> Along with my statistical support adviser Doug Allen, I calculated this statistic using SPSS. The numbers differ slightly from the figures reported by Pew in their biennial reports, because Pew employs demographic weighting when calculating their data.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>180</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 92.

changes spurred by the women's movement and feminism attracted men to talk radio.<sup>181</sup> As host Jack Armstrong described, talk radio appealed to angry white men who spent a lot of time in their cars and felt unrepresented by the media. These men felt like their children used them as ATMs, and their wives and bosses were perpetually angry with them. Talk radio gave them a companion in their anger.<sup>182</sup> Susan Douglas ventures further, arguing that talk radio played a central role in efforts to restore masculine prerogatives to where they were before the women's movement.

Talk radio hosts and listeners lampooned women's rights activists and glorified traditional gender roles. Limbaugh dubbed the most strident feminists "feminazis" and joked about appreciating the women's movement when behind it. He argued that, "feminism was established so that unattractive, ugly broads could have easy access to the mainstream. Bunch of cows." He reveled in stories such as one in which a formerly all-male club was forced to admit female members, who then demanded a women's exercise room. The club responded by providing one with "exercise equipment"—a washer, an ironing board, and a vacuum. 184

Additionally, hosts oozed testosterone and frequently objectified women. For example, host G. Gordon Liddy described himself as virile, vigorous, and potent, and noted after a three day weekend, "ladies it has been a long dry period, three days, but we're back and the hour of free release is upon you." Similarly, during a 2005 discussion of the previous weekend's NASCAR race, Neil Boortz's sidekick Royal Marshall observed that female driver Danica

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>181</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 288-292; 302-307.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>182</sup> Jack Armstrong, Interview With Author,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>183</sup> "Rush Limbaugh's America," PBS Frontline.

<sup>184</sup> Boyer, "Bull Rush," 208.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>185</sup> G. Gordon Liddy, "The G. Gordon Liddy Show," July 5, 1994, *C-Span* Broadcast, <a href="http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/58461-1">http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/58461-1</a>.

Patrick had been lucky not to "bust her ass right there in front of God and everybody." He editorialized, "sounds like a woman to me." Boortz followed up by observing that Patrick was "hot." A few minutes later, Marshall apologized for criticizing Patrick, noting "apparently that's a sacred cow." Boortz responded, "oh she's not a cow." Been when female guests appeared in studio, hosts often focused on their looks, not their ideas. For example, in 2005, when People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' Santa's Little Helper visited Cincinnati host Bill Cunningham and his sidekick Richard "Segman" Dennison to take part in a debate over the merits of tofurkey vs. fried turkey, they spent most of the segment objectifying her. When Segman discussed the prospect of ending up in a hospital because of a bad diet, and Santa's Little Helper offered to bring him delicious vegetarian food, he responded, "if you wear that outfit, you'll wake me right up." Later Cunningham remarked, "looking like you honey, I can see people buying whatever you're selling." 187

Many hosts also tried to discredit feminists, often by highlighting their inconsistencies and double standards. When a hairdresser accused Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) of sexual harassment in 1992 without receiving much national attention, Limbaugh speculated that feminists were less eager to support Inouye's accuser than they had been to support Anita Hill because Inouye was a prominent liberal Democrat. Liddy provided a different allure for men, talking about the numerous ways he knew how to kill a person and holding court about guns. But he also appealed to a male audience frustrated by changing gender roles and claims of gender

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>186</sup> Neal Boortz, *The Neal Boortz Show*, May 31, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>187</sup> Bill Cunningham, *The Big Show With Bill Cunningham*, December 20, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>188</sup> Rush Limbaugh, Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 23, 1992 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

discrimination. Liddy argued with a female veteran who called his show until she conceded that women were not fit for certain combat roles because they could not perform sufficiently well to avoid getting themselves or members of their unit killed. When she added that some men presented the same problem, Liddy replied that people accepted those men getting winnowed out, but that when the military winnowed women out, it faced accusations of sex discrimination. Liddy had thus both delegitimized gender discrimination complaints and struck a blow for the forces of traditional gender roles.

Hence, as several newspaper articles suggested, talk radio provided an outlet for President Nixon's famous "silent majority." Diane from Los Angeles, a 2005 caller to Sean Hannity's program, noted that for forty years the silent majority had no voice, but that talk radio gave it a voice. Hosts like Limbaugh and Hannity— himself a member of the Silent Majority— a devout Catholic, blue collar son of a probation officer, college dropout, and a former bartender and building contractor— adapted the message of Reagan conservatism to the social and fiscal conservatives of the middle class, and more specifically, to so-called Reagan Democrats. <sup>191</sup> Limbaugh attracted many former Democrats like St Louis listeners Patty O'Neil and Barbara Potzman. Potzman came from a traditional Democratic background. She was Catholic and the daughter of a union member. <sup>192</sup> Yet, Limbaugh's conservative message on issues like taxes, regulation, achievement, and personal responsibility also resonated with the new Sunbelt suburban conservatives depicted by historians including Matt Lassiter, Kevin Kruse, and Lisa

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>189</sup> G. Gordon Liddy Show, July 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>190</sup> Levinson, "America's Yakking It Up;" Donna Petrozzello, "Clinton Criticizes Media for Message; Talk Show Hosts Defend Themselves, Saying Their Programs Mirror Public Opinion, *Broadcasting and Cable*, July 4, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>191</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 77; "Howard Kurtz, "Radio's New Right Fielder; For Conservative Hannity, Liberal Praise," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2002.

<sup>192</sup> Lambrecht, "Radio Activity."

McGirr.<sup>193</sup> Limbaugh called for Republicans to defend trickle down economics, because, "the prosperity of the '80s is undeniable."<sup>194</sup> Additionally, he argued for a flat tax, or, at the very least, for all Americans to pay the same tax rate. He referred to the graduated income tax as, "an assault on achievement." Tax cuts should benefit the wealthy, because, "There's nothing wrong with earning a lot of money--you do it the right way--hard work and so forth."<sup>195</sup> An analysis of Limbaugh's audience shows his popularity among both groups. His audience consisted largely of conservative, middle to upper middle class white men who frequently attended church and around one-third of whom were Southern.<sup>196</sup>

Whether Limbaugh shaped his listeners' opinions, or simply voiced them was difficult to discern. He admitted that he liked "to try to persuade," but with the caveat that he wanted "it to happen genuinely. I don't want to be pointing fingers in people's face... and force them to agree. I want them to come to it on their own." Limbaugh believed that he thrived, "because I validate what millions of Americans already think," and he denied pandering to the views of his listeners. Rather, he simply espoused his own beliefs. In fact, early in his time in New York, Limbaugh explained to consultant Bill McMahon that he refrained from covering certain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>193</sup> Lisa McGirr, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Matthew Lassiter, The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kevin Kruse, White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>194</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, Produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 14, 1992 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>195</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion About Students From Different Colleges Joining the Program; How Sam Donaldson Is In the Hot Seat; Higher Taxes for the Wealthy," *Rush Limbaugh*, April 3, 1995; Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, October 14, 1992.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>196</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 90-104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>197</sup> David Barker offers evidence that Limbaugh affects his listeners' attitudes towards the issues. Barker, *Rushed to Judgment*, 30-74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>198</sup> Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, "Interview With Rush Limbaugh; Bush Responds to DUI Charge From 1976," *Hannity & Colmes*, Fox News Channel, November 3, 2000, TV Transcript.

newsworthy topics on his show because he had not figured out what he thought about them, and would not discuss them until he knew what he thought; he refused to discuss other hot topics because he did not care about them.<sup>199</sup> Limbaugh's beliefs just happened "to fit what a certain number of Americans think who are not being satisfied by the mainstream press."<sup>200</sup> He argued that he gave these listeners ammunition with which to explain their deeply held views to others.<sup>201</sup> As host Tom Leykis remarked after talk radio's first big political triumph, "if the person listening doesn't already have a strong, passionate feeling about an issue, the talk show host isn't going to give it to him."<sup>202</sup>

Yet, Limbaugh undeniably advanced the Republican and conservative agenda by applying the worldview that he shared with his listeners to issues with which at least some of his listeners might not be familiar. When he discussed draft legislation that had not even left committee, most of his listeners were unlikely to have been familiar with it (especially in the preinternet age). Also, his audience's loyalty allowed Limbaugh to reinforce their conservative political values.<sup>203</sup> Finally, Limbaugh conveyed his political slant to listeners who either knew

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>199</sup> The intimacy of talk radio required this sort of authenticity from a host. Hosts who frequently changed their positions, lied to their listeners, or who did not deeply believe what they were saying had ratings trouble; Bill McMahon, interview with author; Thom Hartmann, interview with author; George Oliva, interview with author; Valerie Geller, interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>200</sup> Juan Williams, "Interview with Rush Limbaugh," Special Report With Brit Hume, *Fox News Channel*, February 25, 1999, Federal Document Clearing House, TV Transcript.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>201</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Why You Listen To This Program, *The Rush Limbaugh Program*, June 25, 2007, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/06/25/why\_you\_listen\_to\_this\_program">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/06/25/why\_you\_listen\_to\_this\_program</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>202</sup> "Talk Hosts Steer Listeners Into Political Process: Radio Personalities Gear Up For Campaign Finance Reform Push," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 14, 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>203</sup> Jim Rutenberg, "Despite Other Voices, Limbaugh's Is Still Strong," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2000, C1; This claim fits with the findings of Daniel J. Hopkins and Jonathan Ladd, whose research on Fox News shows that, "access to an ideologically distinctive media source reinforces the loyalty of co-partisans without influencing outpartisans." Daniel J Hopkins and Jonathan McDonald Ladd, "The Consequences of Broader Media Choice: Evidence from the Expansion of Fox News," May 30, 2012), Available at SSRN: <a href="http://ssrn.com/abstract=2070596">http://ssrn.com/abstract=2070596</a> or <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2070596">http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2070596</a>.

little about politics, or who cared minimally about them, because as one of these listeners, put it, "Rush makes politics fun." <sup>204</sup>

# **Talk Radio's Drift Rightward**

Although Limbaugh's rise contributed to the rapid increase in the number of talk stations between 1987 and 1993, and a shift in focus towards more political talk, these changes did not immediately signal the rise of doctrinaire *conservative* talk. As late as 1993, talk radio was fairly equally divided ideologically. David Bartlett, the President of the Radio and TV News Director's Association, told *Broadcasting and Cable* that less than fifty percent of talk show hosts were conservative, although many of the most widely syndicated and popular programs were conservative or "investigate in nature." A 1993 Times Mirror Survey of 112 talk radio hosts supported Bartlett's assertion; it found that a slight plurality of the hosts leaned towards the Democratic Party, with a "relatively even split" between liberals and conservatives. Thirty-nine percent of the hosts had voted for Bill Clinton, as opposed to twenty-three percent who voted for George H.W. Bush and eighteen percent who voted for Ross Perot. 206

Talk radio actually first successfully entered the political fray in 1989, when a coalition of hosts from across the ideological spectrum crusaded against Congress giving itself a fifty-one percent pay raise without so much as a vote. The action began when liberal activist Ralph Nader raised the issue on moderate host Jerry Williams' show in Boston, while simultaneously a caller

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>204</sup> Bernstein, "Show Time in the Rush Room."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>205</sup> Cooper, "Talkers Brace for Fairness Assault."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>206</sup> Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, "The Vocal Minority in American Politics," July 16, 1993, 2; 14-15, http://people-press.org/report/19930716/the-vocal-minority-in-american-politics.

raised the issue with Detroit host Roy Fox.<sup>207</sup> Fox and Williams along with forty to fifty of their peers organized a protest to bombard Congress with tea bags and letters.<sup>208</sup>

Limbaugh's popularity, however, ignited a chain of dominos that over time propelled talk radio to the right. The imbalance between conservative and liberal hosts on news/talk stations emerged initially because programmers concluded, based upon the success of Limbaugh, Liddy, and other early entertaining conservatives, that conservative political talk would generate more listeners (or listeners who tuned in for longer periods), and in turn, higher advertising rates, than other talk formats. They responded by hiring a steady stream of dogmatic conservatives who pressed partisan talking points and often lacked the entertainment value of Limbaugh's early years. Por example, shortly after Limbaugh's ratings spiked on Denver's KOA, the station fired its mid-morning liberal host and replaced him with a conservative. Additionally, Limbaugh's success catalyzed a newfound interest in politics and a drift to the right for some

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>207</sup> The sources disagree as to which hosts started the campaign. Balz and Brownstein credited moderate Seattle host Michael Siegel; Dan Balz and Ron Brownstein, *Storming the Gates* (New York: Little Brown, 1996), 166. Susan Douglas explained that Fox, Williams, and Siegel all became interested in the issue around the same time. Douglas, *Listening In*, 286.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>208</sup> EJ Dionne Jr., "Washington Talk: Radio and Politics; Waves on Airwaves: Power to the People," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1989; Jeffrey York, "On the Dial; Tea but no Sympathy," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1989; Hill Steamed Over Radio's Tea Time: Many in House and Senate Blame Talk Show Drive Against Proposed Pay Raise For Turning Public Sentiment Against Plan, *Broadcasting and Cable*, February 13, 1989; Bruce McCabe, "AM Radio Heating Up The Airwaves," *The Boston Globe*, February 10, 1989, 41. See page 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>209</sup> A consensus existed within the radio industry that Limbaugh's program lost some of the zaniness, irreverence, and entertainment value that characterized it during its run at KFBK and during its early years in syndication and became more politicized over time. Many people in the industry dated the change to some point in the mid 1990s, after which Limbaugh started buying into the hype about his political influence, and taking himself and his show more seriously. Limbaugh offered a hint as to why this change occurred in a 1995 interview. He began his show without political goals. Yet, unbeknownst to him, many in his audience celebrated finally being able to hear someone in the media saying what they thought. He had to take that reaction into account, because he wanted to generate the largest audience possible. Additionally, as his program grew, "and as millions have tuned in, there is now incumbent upon me a responsibility to be honest, credible, believable, and to not do things that are perceived to be outrageous, or off the wall just for the purpose of being noticed or making a splash, but rather being believable;" "Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series, The First Annual Radio Festival: Rush Limbaugh and the Talk Radio Revolution," October 24, 1995, Catalog number T:40932, accessed at the Paley Center's New York branch.

hosts, or at least a shift towards belligerency and bombast.<sup>210</sup> However, this initial stream of programming decisions did not immediately signal a transition to all conservative syndicated stations—those were still a decade into the future.

For three reasons, 1991 marked the first critical inflection point that moved talk radio towards an all conservative format. First, the Gulf War and Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court nomination occurred in 1991. As the Media Resource Center's Rich Noise explained on Liddy's program in 2006, these events demonstrated the press' bias to many conservatives. They would watch General Norman Schwarzkopf's briefings, live CNN war footage, or later in the year, live proceedings from the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. When they subsequently saw the synthesis and analysis presented on the evening newscasts, they realized that the newscasts omitted everything that they perceived to be important, while covering all of the things that benefitted liberals. As caller Phillip from Texas explained to Liddy and Noise, he listened to the Pentagon briefing each day on the way home from work, and then turned the nightly news on and, baffled, wondered from where the newscasters got their information.<sup>211</sup> This eye opening disjunction left many conservatives hungry for an alternative, and created even more of a potential audience for talk radio. Additionally, their search for Gulf War news led many people to unintentionally discover Limbaugh. At that point in time, his program aired on many full service

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>210</sup> David Marshak, "Rush Accentuates the Negative," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 9, 1994, A19. Joanne Ostrow, "THE RUSH TO RIGHTEOUSNESS: Talk Show Conservatives Bring in the Money," *The Denver Post*, April 10, 1994, FI; Laurie Cantillo, email message to author, January 21, 2013. Bill McMahon, Interview with Author, January 23, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>211</sup> G. Gordon Liddy, "Interview With Rich Noise," *The G. Gordon Liddy Program*, March 21, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

news/talk stations. As relatively few cities had all news stations,<sup>212</sup> people looking for newscasts would turn on the news/talk station, and often get Limbaugh after the news, or while waiting for the news, and they found him to be entertaining and funny, and decided to make the program part of their daily routines. This confluence of forces sent Limbaugh's ratings skyrocketing.<sup>213</sup>

Finally, in October of 1991, General Manager Shannon Sweatte and Program Director Brian Jennings came to a fateful conclusion regarding the programming on Seattle's KVI. KVI broadcast a mix of liberal and conservative talk when Lee Vanden Handel, the affiliate relations manager for EFM Media/Limbaugh, asked Sweatte why KVI broadcast liberal shows when the audience did not want to hear them. Sweatte and Jennings began studying the situation. They fielded calls from listeners and they observed that their conservative hosts received better ratings than their liberal hosts. Jennings decided to experiment, and replaced one of the liberal hosts with a conservative. When Jennings saw that the new conservative program garnered higher ratings than its predecessor, he turned the station into an entirely conservative talk station, and branded it as such in advertising. In two and a half years, KVI rose from twenty-third in the ratings to first, catching the attention of programmers nationwide. The success of the all conservative format stunned Sweatte. Listeners never went away, which allowed some

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>212</sup> Interview subjects Joel Oxley and Jim Farley, who worked for Washington all news station WTOP, conveyed that only eleven markets had all news stations. By contrast, the Pew Research Center's 2015 State of the Media Report put the number of all news stations at 31 (in 27 markets) in 2014. This total represented a decline from 2012 when 37 all news stations existed. It is possible that Oxley and Farley defined all news stations differently than Pew—indeed, Farley mentioned that other cities had stations that called themselves all news, but also had news/talk programs. It is also possible that they were considering only major markets. Jim Farley, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2014; Joel Oxley, Interview With Author, January 14, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>213</sup> Hobbs, Interview with Author; Michael Smerconish, Interview With Author; Finding data to support this theory would be incredibly difficult because of how Arbitron measured ratings. First, many stations were unrated, including a lot of the small ones that aired Limbaugh's program at the time. Second, Arbitron did not break out data by show. Rather, it measured by daypart, including a midday slot of 10 AM to 3 PM, and Limbaugh's show only aired for 2 or 3 hours of that block. Today, it is far easier to parse data because of advances in computer technology.

advertisers to cut back from twenty plus commercials per week to three while maintaining the same results. KVI was the first all conservative talk station in America.<sup>214</sup>

Limbaugh's success combined with KVI's rapid ascent in the ratings created a demand for conservative programming.<sup>215</sup> In September, 1992, Michael Reagan launched a syndicated show (albeit with only five affiliates). By August 1993, he had sixty five affiliates.<sup>216</sup> On April 15, 1993, Infinity Broadcasting started syndicating Liddy's Washington DC based program nationwide.<sup>217</sup> Previously, Limbaugh broadcast the only major nationally syndicated conservative program. Yet, even after Liddy's launch, syndicated conservative programming remained in its infancy, and would not fully flourish until later in the decade.

KVI's success also had further repercussions. In 1994, KGO-AM General Manager Mickey Luckoff convinced his station owner, ABC/Capitol Cities, that they should take advantage of new FCC rules allowing owners to have 2 AM stations and 2 FM stations in a single market to purchase KSFO in San Francisco. KSFO had once been a top station that had fallen on hard times, which did not bother Luckoff, who wanted to purchase KSFO to prevent anyone from using it to compete with his number one ranked station's full service talk format. Yet, this strategy left Luckoff with a station that needed a format. After a brief period in which alternative talk formats failed, he asked his former program director Jack Swanson, then serving

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>214</sup> Other predominately or even entirely conservative stations existed prior to 1991. However management did not brand these stations as airing conservative talk. KVI was the first station to consciously build an all conservative format and sell the programming lineup as such. Shannon Sweatte, Interview With Author, April 15, 2013; Brian Jennings, interview with author, October 29, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>215</sup> Swanson, Interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>216</sup> Jay Horning, "Michael Reagan finds a home on talk radio Series: NEWSMAKERS REVISITED," *The St Petersburg Times*, August 15, 1993; Tom Blair, "All the News That Fits…" *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 4, 1992.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>217</sup> Peter Viles, "Only in America: Liddy Goes National (G. Gordon Liddy's Radio Show Gets Nationwide Syndication)," *Broadcasting and Cable*, May 3, 1993, 43.

as a station general manager in Seattle, whether the KVI model would work in San Francisco. Swanson thought that it would because San Franciscans's tolerance had limits—they accepted all types of people... except for conservatives. They scorned and ostracized conservatives, and Swanson knew that he had an underserved population looking to have their views validated and looking for a community of like-minded people. He returned to San Francisco to program KGO and KSFO, and KSFO skyrocketed as an all conservative talk station. As KSFO was a Cap Cities/ABC stations, Swanson's colleagues at other Cap Cities/ABC stations took note of KSFO's success, thinking that if conservative talk could work in one of the most liberal cities in the country, it could work elsewhere.<sup>218</sup> All conservative talk first flourished in two liberal markets in part because a niche radio station needed only to draw 3-5% of the local population to succeed from a business perspective. Conservatives surrounded by liberals could use the station to band together and talk to each other.<sup>219</sup>

Even in 1994 and 1995, as KVI and KSFO flourished as all conservative talk stations, talk radio actually remained fairly diverse ideologically. In 1995, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* accurately labeled sixty to seventy percent of the nation's talk radio hosts as right of center, which better described hosts during this period than conservative.<sup>220</sup> Only a few nationally syndicated conservative political talk shows existed at this time. In fact, a 1995 *Times Mirror* survey found that only thirty-six percent of talk show hosts called themselves very conservative

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>218</sup> Mickey Luckoff, Interview With Author; Jack Swanson, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>219</sup> Jim Farley, Interview with Author, December 20, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>220</sup> The *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz observed that approximately seventy percent of talk radio hosts were conservative in 1994. Yet, right of center better depicted hosts's ideological diversity at this time. There was substantial diversity of views among the hosts, many of whom were not doctrinaire conservatives. Kurtz, "Radio Daze A Day With the Country's Masters of Gab;" Joe Logan, "Tuning In to More Than Disaffection It's The Talk of The Town, The State, The Nation. And It Means Profits For Radio Stations," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 7, 1995.

or conservative.<sup>221</sup> Many stations still maintained an eclectic mix of programs, and while their overall lineups leaned right, they certainly did not feature doctrinaire conservatives discussing national politics all day. For example, WWDB FM in Philadelphia provided a daily lineup of Paul W. Smith hosting a morning show without too much of a viewpoint, Limbaugh, Susan Bray, a right of center, but not strongly conservative, host, Irv Homer, the local star and a libertarian, several apolitical advice shows, Bernie Herman, a liberal host, and Dom Giordano, a conservative in the overnight hours.<sup>222</sup> However, in the wake of the success of KSFO, many of the other influential ABC/Cap Cities station managers began tinkering with adding conservative shows in place of liberal or apolitical ones.<sup>223</sup> Like Jennings, they found that conservative talk attracted more listeners.

Furthermore, two political factors between 1992 and 1994 contributed to the migration of programming in a conservative direction. First, the candidacy and election of Bill Clinton greatly benefitted conservative talkers. Clinton provided them with material and gave them something against which to rail.<sup>224</sup> As Tom Taylor put it, "it's more fun to be outside on the lawn and throw rocks at the glass house." He explained that Limbaugh excelled at ridiculing and making fun of things; thus Clinton's presidency was a gift to Limbaugh.<sup>225</sup> Second, after Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994 and the new House majority credited Limbaugh with their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>221</sup> Alexandra Marks, "Talk Radio's Voice Booms Across America: 75 Years After the First Radio Broadcast, its Newfound Influence is Felt in Washington" *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 1995, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>222</sup> David Rimmer, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>223</sup> Swanson, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>224</sup> Indeed, Douglas called Clinton's election, "arguably one of the best things that happened to Limbaugh;" Douglas, *Listening In*, 315.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>225</sup> Tom Taylor, Interview with Author.

ascension, programmers became that much more likely to associate Limbaugh's popularity with his conservatism, and not his entertainment value.<sup>226</sup>

### Consolidation

Passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which allowed for greater consolidation of station ownership, was the critical next step in the migration towards predominately conservative syndicated political talk airing in most markets. Subsequently, large media conglomerates assumed control of and started reprogramming struggling stations using a one-size fits all approach that guaranteed a proliferation of the thriving, profitable, "in" programming format, which in the mid-1990s meant conservative talk radio.<sup>227</sup>

The Telecommunications Act paved the way for the vertically and horizontally integrated modern radio industry in which large, publicly traded corporations own hundreds of stations, as well as syndication companies to provide programming. For example, iHeartMedia (formerly Clear Channel), the owner of the largest number of stations in the United States (currently 850), also owns syndicator Premiere Radio, which distributes Limbaugh's program, among others.<sup>228</sup> The Telecommunications Act eliminated the national caps limiting the total number of stations a company could own, and raised the individual market cap from two AMs and two FMs to eight stations, with no more than five on a single service (AM or FM) in major markets, with lower

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>226</sup> Kevin Merida, "Rush Limbaugh Saluted as Majority Maker," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 1994;
Katharine Q. Steele, "Republicans Get a Pep Talk From Rush Limbaugh," *The New York Times*, December 12, 1994;
Jim Rutenberg, "Despite Other Voices, Limbaugh Still Strong," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>227</sup> Harry A. Jessell, "Telecom Bill; a Deal, But Not Done (Major Telecommunications Bill)," *Broadcasting and Cable*, January 1, 1996.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>228</sup> iHeartMedia Inc, "Corporate," <a href="http://www.iheartmedia.com/Corporate/Pages/about.aspx">http://www.iheartmedia.com/Corporate/Pages/about.aspx</a>, accessed June 1, 2015.

limits in smaller markets. This legal change accelerated consolidation, <sup>229</sup> as companies started acquiring stations at a frenzied pace. <sup>230</sup> Wall Street saw an industry that had been artificially restricted being opened up to growth. Radio produced very good cash flow because it had low and knowable fixed costs, which made radio stations a good investment. As Wall Street invested in companies gobbling up stations, the industry wisdom became to get big, or to get out and cash in while one could. <sup>231</sup> Within five years, the three largest radio ownership conglomerates, iHeartMedia, Infinity Broadcasting, and Cumulus, owned close to 1700 stations. <sup>232</sup> By 2002, twenty-one companies owned more than forty stations, which had been the maximum number of stations a company could own before 1996, and the ten largest companies controlled 67% of the industry's revenues. <sup>233</sup>

These big conglomerates purchased many stations struggling with more balanced or less political talk formats, not because of their balance or subject matter, but because they lacked the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>229</sup> Ownership limits had already been increased in 1984, 1992, and 1994. The changes raised the limits from seven AM stations and seven FM stations nationally, to twelve AMs and twelve FMs, to eighteen and eighteen, and twenty and twenty. Thus, the consolidation process began before the Telecommunications Act; Josh Hyatt, "Radio Waves To The Future," *The Boston Globe*, January 23, 1994; Eric Klineberg, *Fighting For Air*, 26-27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>230</sup> As Douglas noted, another deregulatory move, suspension of the so-called anti-trafficking rule, which had previously forced companies to own a station for three years before reselling it, also contributed to this frenzy. Douglas, *Listening In*, 296; 298.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>231</sup> Many owners who did not plan on selling their stations eventually did when offered twelve to fifteen times the station's cash flow; Eric Klineberg detailed the difficulty for individually owned stations trying to compete with the corporate giants, because the giants took advantage of economies of scale unavailable to the individually owned station; Klineberg, *Fighting For Air*, 57-61; Holland Cooke, Interview With Author; Tom Taylor Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>232</sup> The precise number of stations owned by these companies at any one moment fluctuated rapidly. Some mergers, such as the one between Clear Channel and AM/FM, required the sale of stations to gain regulatory approval. In fact, Cumulus over expanded and then had to sell 70 stations in an effort to cut costs. Tom Taylor, Interview with Author; Christopher Stern, "Blocked Radio Deals Approved: Chairman of FCC Uses Administrative Power," *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2001; Tim Jones, "Fall of Milwaukee-Based Media Empire Shows Perilous Flip Side of Buying Frenzy," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 2000. Katherine Yung, "Merger Creates World's Largest Radio, Billboard Company," *The Dallas Morning News*, October, 5, 1999.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>233</sup> Klineberg, *Fighting For Air*, 62; Klineberg's estimate may be low. According to a 2001 Op-Ed by Senators Ernest Hollings and Byron Dorgan, the top four companies controlled 90% of the industry's advertising revenue; Ernest F. Hollings and Byron Dorgan, "Your Local Station, Signing Off," *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2001.

wherewithal to identify and pay talented local hosts, especially in smaller markets. The new corporate owners replaced many of these stations with the same conservative, political, and increasingly with time, syndicated, talk programming because they saw the success of Limbaugh and stations like KVI and KSFO. Additionally, as syndicators increased conservative programming, the combination of barter method and vertical integration made predominantly conservative formats more economically beneficial for stations than other formats. Whereas costly local talk programming required the sale of a large number of commercials to pay talent and advertising budgets, the barter method merely necessitated giving up five commercials per hour to the syndicator. Stations failing to sell their advertising loads saw little harm in giving those commercial slots away.<sup>234</sup> Thanks to the demand for conservative talk, as syndicators increased their programming, conservative shows constituted much of what they produced. Additionally, as the industry vertically integrated, it made economic sense for ownership to air programming produced by their syndication arms because for one set of talent and production costs, they generated programming for hundreds of stations.

Programmers would have been less open to airing syndicated talk shows had Limbaugh (and Howard Stern) not reversed the conventional wisdom within the industry.<sup>235</sup> Before Limbaugh, daytime syndicated talk struggled to produce ratings.<sup>236</sup> Programmers had thus believed that only locally based talk shows could succeed. Limbaugh's popularity, however,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>234</sup> Bill Handel, Interview with Author, November 20, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>235</sup> John Mainelli, e-mail message to author, November 9, 2010; Stern's ability to overcome local star John DeBella in the ratings after being syndicated to highly parochial Philadelphia indicated that the best syndicated programs could triumph over even high quality and popular local shows. See Chuck Darrow, How Philadelphia put Howard Stern on the Path to Stardom," *The Philadelphia Daily News*, August 17, 2001; Chuck Darrow, "WMGK-FM Host John DeBella Marks 30 years in Philly Radio," *The Philadelphia Daily News, November 12, 2012*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>236</sup> Mainelli e-mail messages to author, November 21, 2010.

increased the demand for syndicated programs because it showed that entertainment value, not local focus, determined ratings success for talk programs.<sup>237</sup>

Syndicated programming both positively and negatively affected talk radio. On the one hand, it increased the level of talent in many smaller markets that could not afford to pay the salaries required to lure top quality hosts to their stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer and stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer and stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic realities grew grimmer for small stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic stations. Further, it kept some stations on the air as the economic flower and local format as the economic flower and local format as the economic flower and local format as the economic flower and local flower and loc

Syndication also destroyed the farm team for talk radio. As syndicated shows replaced local shows, the next generation of hosts, who had once cut their teeth in small markets, before moving to medium and then large markets, or who had once learned the craft working overnights

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>237</sup> Colford, *Rush Limbaugh Story*, 72-158; Donna Petrozzello, "Talk, Talk, Talk: Formula for Success. (Radio Talk Shows)," *Broadcasting and Cable*, June 13, 1994; Colford, interview with author, November 18, 2010; Reid E. Bunzel, "Talk Networks Pursue Role of AM White Knight," *Broadcasting and Cable*, August 27, 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>238</sup> Lars Larson, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>239</sup> Swanson, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>240</sup> Armstrong, Interview With Author.

and on weekends, no longer had a place to hone their skills.<sup>241</sup> For example, Sean Hannity traveled a long road to national stardom. He lasted a few weeks in his first job on a California college radio station. By his own admission, Hannity was "atrocious." Subsequently, he worked at stations in Athens, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia before landing at WABC in New York.<sup>242</sup> During Hannity's time at WVNN in Alabama, the station only broadcast one local show.<sup>243</sup> Subsequently, however, WVNN expanded to having a local morning show and a local afternoon drive time show.<sup>244</sup> Yet, it later reverted to only having a local morning show coupled with syndicated programming, and while the station has returned to having two local shows today, they only run from five to eleven AM.<sup>245</sup> Hannity's station in Atlanta, WGST, currently has two daily local shows, but they only total three hours per day. Even WABC, a powerhouse station in the nation's second largest market, aired entirely syndicated weekday programming until early 2014 when iHeartMedia moved Limbaugh and Hannity's programs to iHeartMedia owned

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>241</sup> Mark Mason, Interview With Author, November 15, 2012; Brian Jennings, Interview With Author; George Oliva, Interview With Author; Doug Stephan, Interview With Author, December 10, 2012; Dave Elswick, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>242</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Radio's New Right Fielder; For Conservative Hannity, Liberal Praise," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>243</sup> The information on WVNN's programming during Hannity's time there comes from Hannity as communicated to the author by Carly Shannon from Fox News on May 23, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>244</sup> Darla Jaye, E-mail Message to Author, June 14, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>245</sup> Like WVNN, many small stations, including KCNN in North Dakota, aired predominately syndicated programming even in the early 1990s. The major change, however, has come in mid-size and major markets that once had predominately local, or entirely local programming, and now air predominately syndicated programming. Additionally, those small stations that did once air predominately local programming have largely shifted to syndicated programming over time.

WOR,<sup>246</sup> which prompted WABC to add several local shows.<sup>247</sup> Even in many large markets, the syndicated paranormal show Coast to Coast airs overnight and the weekends are a mixture of advice shows, syndicated programming, weekly best of shows,<sup>248</sup> and paid infomercials. Thus, as opportunities in small, medium, and large markets dried up, young hosts faced increasing difficulty developing the skills required to do talk radio well.

Ideologically, syndication contributed to the increasing conservatism of talk radio programming. As hosts moved into syndication, they faced pressure from programmers and the audience to stick to discussing national politics from a conservative slant. Sticking to the branding that linked the various programs on a station together (usually conservative talk) and the need to appeal to listeners across the country (local hosts could focus on topics and themes that were often either apolitical, or at least avoided ideological boxes) required shows becoming more generic. As a result, many hosts, including Hannity and Liddy became more political after their programs entered syndication. As John Kobylt recounted, when he and Ken Chiampou took their populist conservative show national in the late 1990s, they could not possibly satisfy the audience attracted by many of their stations, because the stations's other hosts dogmatically spewed such venom towards President Clinton that listeners perceived Kobylt and Chiampou to be insufficiently conservative.<sup>249</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>246</sup> IHeartMedia bought WOR in 2012. The company also owned Hannity and Limbaugh syndicator Premiere Radio. When the hosts's contracts with their longtime station, WABC, expired, iHeartMedia moved them to WOR.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>247</sup> Gerry Yandel, "Talk Radio Realigns Its Forces For Next Battle WGST-AM Hires A Conservative Host; WSB's Lineup Is More Liberal," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 14, 1992; The information regarding the programming on WVNN, WGST WABC comes from the programming schedules on their websites as of June 9 2015; "News Talk WVNN," http://www.wvnn.com; "On Air," WGST, <a href="http://www.640wgst.com/onair/">http://www.640wgst.com/onair/</a>; "77 WABC Radio," http://www.wabcradio.com.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>248</sup> Many top syndicated stars including Limbaugh, Hannity, and Glenn Beck produced and distributed weekly best of programming.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>249</sup> John Kobylt, Interview With Author, February 8, 2013; Jeremy Coleman, Interview With Author, January 18, 2013.

Large corporate ownership also had a positive and negative impact on talk programming, and moved talk radio in a conservative direction.<sup>250</sup> On the one hand, it, too, contributed to putting the best programs and formats on in smaller markets that might not otherwise have been able to afford such programming. It also placed top quality radio programmers in charge of many of these stations. Additionally, as conglomerates initially bought clusters of stations in a city, they had reason and wherewithal to try different formats on all of the stations.<sup>251</sup> Finally, programmer Randall Bloomquist noted that when working for a big corporation, he had access to resources that he never would have had with local ownership.<sup>252</sup> Conversely, however, many of these programmers oversaw more and more stations, and sometimes a programmer with a background in music radio oversaw a conglomerate's cluster of stations in a market, including talk stations. These programmers struggled to mentor and develop talk talent.<sup>253</sup> Additionally, as conglomerates purchased increasing numbers of stations, their debt loads soared, and they started looking to cut costs, because as publicly traded companies they could not afford bad quarters or a bad financial outlook.

This desire to cut costs prevented them from investing in their products (i.e. by having more local programming, larger promotional budgets, investing in training talent, and doing market research.) In some cases, they even eliminated popular local programs to cut costs. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>250</sup> Eric Klineberg's *Fighting For Air* detailed the devastating impact that corporate owned stations could have in moments of crisis. Corporate owners, especially iHeartMedia, eliminated local programming in favor of cheaper syndicated shows and voice tracking, leaving no one in the studio to share emergency information with the community, or even to answer the phone when local emergency management, desperate to get information on the air, called. Klineberg also detailed how corporate owners actively worked to deceive listeners into believing that their hosts were locally based.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>251</sup> Gary Burns, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>252</sup> Bloomquist, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>253</sup> David Bernstein, Interview with Author, October 18, 2012; Jim Bohannon, Interview with Author, October 3, 2012.

budget crunch also made programmers skittish and afraid to take risks, which were far more likely to result in a pink slip than the development of a major hit. As Gabe Hobbs, who programmed iHeartMedia's talk stations, explained, for every successful show that a programmer developed, he probably had nine flops. Investing in new talent or new formats encompassed needless expense and risk when a programmer could put syndicated stars on for most of the day and know that he would have an entertaining, financially prosperous radio station.<sup>254</sup>

Additionally, because of these financial pressures, stations could not countenance the often lengthy germination period required for new talent or a new format to develop. When Cox switched KFI to an edgy talk format in the late 1980s, Cox President Bob Neal admitted to Bill Handel that he anticipated that it would take five years to break even. Most programmers believed that it took at least a year and a half to two years to develop a successful show. The debt laden conglomerates could not afford that sort of patience, and Handel believed that he never would have received the opportunity to develop into the most listened to local host in America in the new era of corporate radio. He even expressed doubt that Limbaugh would have been syndicated given the economics of today's radio industry. Limbaugh on the air as part of an edgier, predominately conservative talk format on WLS in Chicago in 1989, his bosses at ABC radio allowed Limbaugh and other hosts to develop an audience over the two years that it took for Limbaugh's program, and the format, to prosper. As Tradup noted, today, that kind of patience

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>254</sup> Gabe Hobbs, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>255</sup> Bill Handel, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>256</sup> Bill Handel, Interview With Author; David Hall, Interview With Author.

does not exist. Rather, "you go two Arbitron periods and if it is not working, you are playing reggae music." 257

Furthermore, some corporate owned stations did not even have a local program director. <sup>258</sup> Corporate station owners sometimes also tied the hands of their program directors both budget-wise, and by strongly encouraging that certain programs either be added to the station's lineup or retained because of the company's broader corporate needs. <sup>259</sup> For example, Peter Ogburn remembered that when iHeartMedia launched Glenn Beck into syndication, executives conveyed to certain iHeartMedia stations, including Ogburn's, how much Beck's success meant to the company. <sup>260</sup> By contrast, when Tradup took over WLS, his bosses gave him wide latitude, instructing him only not to lose their license and not to do anything that would embarrass their company or his family.

Finally, many of the media conglomerates that purchased stations after the passage of the Telecommunications Act shied away from controversy. They did not want to risk offending or angering advertisers.<sup>261</sup> They were far more likely to prohibit the airing of programs that were too controversial than to prohibit airing programs because of their political viewpoints. This preference discouraged these owners from trying to program the expensive, and often controversial, edgy talk formats. For example, in the early 1990s, Program Director Jeremy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>257</sup> Tradup, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>258</sup> Robert Unmacht, Interview With Author; Laurie Cantillo, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>259</sup> Robert Unmacht, Interview With Author; Several other interview subjects shared this information off the record.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>260</sup> While not quite a direct order, ownership gave the program director and station/cluster general manager little choice in the matter; Peter Ogburn, Interview With Author, June 11, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>261</sup> Douglas contended that, "controversy and marketability were joined, that talk radio developed a 'financial dependence on sensation." While controversy might have been one of the selling points of talk radio to advertisers during the 1980s and early 1990s, the inverse became true as time progressed. The internet and social media reinforced this change because stations recorded and/or streamed every word hosts uttered online, and social media made it far easier to organize boycotts of advertisers or programs; Douglas, *Listening In*, 289.

Coleman built Washington's WJFK around edgy personalities and male-oriented talk. His lineup included Stern, Liddy, and the duo of Don Geranamo and Mike O'Meara. Not only was such local talent expensive, 262 but it also required rolling with the punches when one of their controversial hosts provoked outrage and made advertisers skittish. Coleman remembered losing advertisers and having to hold multiple press conferences when Liddy recommended shooting ATF agents in the head if they entered one's house because they wore bullet proof vests.<sup>263</sup> Similarly, Victoria Jones hosted a show on a Greater Media owned Washington station, WWRC. Around the time of OJ Simpson's arrest, she wanted to drive a white Ford Bronco down the Beltway with a police escort. Instead of offering an escort, the police threatened to arrest her. Program Director Gary Burns allowed Jones to pursue this stunt. He encouraged Jones and her colleagues to interview controversial figures like Gennifer Flowers, and to push boundaries and have fun, which at one point included inquiring as to what listeners believed to be the distinguishing characteristics of President Clinton's sexual anatomy.<sup>264</sup> By contrast, as corporate owners grew larger and more debt laden, and they began to have more business interests outside of radio/broadcasting (i.e. Disney's theme parks and children's movies, etc.), they increasingly

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>262</sup> Stern's program was syndicated from New York, but in 1992, it was only syndicated in ten major markets. Douglas, *Listening In*, 303.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>263</sup> Jeremy Coleman, interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>264</sup> Although Greater Media, a corporation, owned WWRC, under the existing FCC ownership caps, it could only own twelve AM and twelve FM stations nationwide before 1992, and after the FCC raised those caps in 1992, eighteen AM and eighteen FM stations. Thus, Greater Media was a far smaller corporate owner than some of today's corporations. Klineberg, *Fighting For Air*, 27.

favored more predictable, sanitized, syndicated political shows over this sort of controversial, edgy, local talk, because they posed less risk.<sup>265</sup>

Owners with a greater array of interests<sup>266</sup> exhibited far less tolerance for controversial stunts and offensive remarks that threatened boycotts, protests, and advertiser angst than radio centric companies or individual owners. The lineup on Burns' Lynchburg, Virginia station included the controversial and often lewd Tom Leykis in spite of complaints from the locally based evangelist Jerry Falwell. Although they eventually achieved detente, Burns refused to allow Falwell's protests to affect his programming lineup. Similarly, when Leykis broadcast in Miami in the 1980s, his station owner simply instructed the host not to lose the station's license, and his general manager counseled him not to worry about losing advertisers, because he had other (local) advertisers queued up.<sup>267</sup> By contrast, when top rated WABC host Bob Grant, who had a thirty year history of racist and provocative statements, lamented on air that Commerce

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>265</sup> Inherent tension existed between advertisers' aversion to controversy, and the controversial and unpredictable nature of the best talk radio. After three years of allowing ABC Radio to sell the Rush Limbaugh show as part of larger advertising packages, Ed McLaughlin brought in Media America principles Ron Hartenbaum and Gary Schonfeld to sell Limbaugh's show as a stand alone entity in order to increase profits. McLaughlin felt that Limbaugh required advertisers who would buy in and knew what they were signing up for so that they would not become squeamish as he pushed the limits of propriety. By that point, advertisers knew about the content of Limbaugh's show, and some chose to buy ad time, with great success, and others shied away because of the controversy. The large conglomerates feared programming with a low power ratio, which measured how ratings translated into revenue. They worried that controversy might boost listenership, while still reducing revenue because advertisers became concerned about offending non-listeners. Indeed, Limbaugh slowly dropped many of the most controversial elements of his show, such as the updates, at least in part because advertisers did not like them; Ron Hartenbaum, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2013; David Hall, Interview With Author; Gabe Hobbs, Interview With Author; Doug Stephan, Interview With Author; Randall Bloomquist, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>266</sup> The diversity of a station owner's holdings mattered as much as its size. As host John Kobylt (who has pushed the boundaries of propriety many times) cogently argued, small owners could sometimes actually be more constrained in supporting a controversial host. Large radio corporations based in big cities understood that hosts had to stir the pot and anger people. By contrast, smaller owners, especially in smaller markets, had more limited advertising bases and got scared when threatened with protests or boycotts. However, that paradigm became reversed with owners with diverse business holdings, such as Disney or Viacom, because they worried about the impact of controversial hosts on other aspects of their business; John Kobylt, Interview With Author; Hobbs, E-mail message to author, March 18, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>267</sup> Tom Leykis, Interview With Author, August 19, 2014.

Secretary Ron Brown might be the only survivor in a plane crash because he was "a pessimist," shortly after Disney bought ABC/Cap Cities, ABC Radio fired Grant amid threats of protests and boycotts. Significantly, however, less than two weeks after Disney fired Grant, he returned to the airwaves on WABC's main competitor WOR, which was then operated by the family owned, radio-centric, Buckley Radio.<sup>268</sup>

Similarly, when WMAL host Michael Graham called Islam "a terrorist organization," the Disney-owned station initially stood behind him. However, after a Council on American-Islam Relations led letter writing campaign inundated the station with complaints, and several advertisers asked the station to remove their ads from Graham's program, the station suspended Graham. According to what management told WMAL Program Director Randall Bloomquist, Disney executives worried that Graham's comments had increased the risk of a terrorist attack at their theme parks. Subsequently, after Graham refused to apologize for remarks he believed to be true, the station fired him.<sup>269</sup> Their bottom line simply left some publicly traded conglomerates unable to countenance inflammatory conduct and statements because they could not afford even temporary financial fallout, or a boycott, which could negatively impact some other aspect of their business.

This conservative corporate culture spawned by consolidated ownership contributed to the increasing conservatism of talk radio programming. To a degree, consolidation would have "locked in" whatever the dominant programming format was in the mid-1990s and fostered a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>268</sup> See "Buckley Radio," <a href="http://buckleyradio.com">http://buckleyradio.com</a> and "Richard D. Buckley," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> Richard-D--Buckley/15818922 (both accessed June 9, 2015). The latter page is not loading properly at the moment, but it's content is also viewable at <a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20130627131407/http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://web.archive.org/web/20130627131407/http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Way Back Machine; "Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine," <a href="http://www.buckleyradio.com/">http://www.buckleyradio.com/</a> pages/15818922.php through the Internet Archive Wayback Mac

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>269</sup> Bloomquist, interview with author, January 28, 2013.

certain uniformity because it increased programmers' risk aversion—it made far more sense to program a conservative talk station than to take a risk and experiment with a format without the same track record of success. Additionally, these conglomerates favored less controversial programming, and discussing national politics from a predictable conservative perspective provided greater safety than some of the alternative possibilities. Finally, consolidation encouraged economies of scale, which dictated syndicating the most popular/promising hosts and airing those programs across the country, rather than investing in building new formats and developing new talent.

#### The Next Conservative Star

The final piece of the ideologically imbalanced talk radio puzzle fell into place in 2001 when Sean Hannity emerged as the next syndicated conservative star. Hannity did not actually generate particularly high ratings on WABC, but executives at ABC Radio, including the Vice President in charge of programming, John McConnell, understood from experience that Hannity had the ability to flourish nationally. His television show (Hannity and Colmes) on Fox News and his time as the vacation fill in for Limbaugh helped spur name recognition, and Hannity had all of the qualities of the best hosts. He was likable and, when working locally, his show ventured beyond the purely political. McConnell recalled a funny, charming story that Hannity told on the air about going to the Louis Vuitton store to buy his wife a purse and being absolutely stunned by the cost of such a handbag. McConnell found Hannity to be human, likable, and willing to make fun of himself and others.<sup>270</sup>

Additionally, consolidation provided Hannity with an unprecedented level of clearance for a nationally debuting host, which contributed to his ascent. ABC arranged for his new

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>270</sup> McConnell, Interview With Author; Swanson, interview with author.

national show to air on ABC owned stations in seven of the top ten markets in the country. Hannity's program also benefitted from happenstance. His national debut occurred on September 10th, 2001.<sup>271</sup> The next day the terrorist attacks of September 11th sent shock waves through the United States and dramatically increased listenership to talk radio. As with the Gulf War and Limbaugh, events resulted in listeners giving Hannity a chance, and again, they liked what they heard. As more stations picked up Hannity's show and achieved ratings success, it provided stations with a six hour block of conservative, political, syndicated programming. At that point, it made sense to programmers who previously might have resisted, or who at least aired a diverse array of syndicated voices, to try to add other conservative, political hosts to compliment Limbaugh and Hannity in an attempt to maintain one consistent primary audience throughout the broadcast day.<sup>272</sup>

Prior to Hannity's emergence, the conservative, but not typically political, lifestyle talker Dr. Laura Schlesinger, and Stern, whose program aired mostly on FM rock stations, were the only other syndicated superstars outside of Limbaugh were. Even if stations aired Limbaugh and Schlesinger, they also might have experimented with a variety of lesser or apolitical syndicated hosts, along with a local show or two to fill out the broadcast day. However, unlike a decade earlier when Limbaugh's popularity first burgeoned, syndicated programming had developed to the point that programmers could now add other syndicated shows to fill out an all conservative and politically focused lineup built around Hannity and Limbaugh. Between 1998 and 2002, Michael Medved (Salem 1998), Neal Boortz (Cox 1999), Mike Gallagher (Self Syndicated 1999), Michael Savage (Talk Radio Network 1999), Dennis Prager (1999), Glenn Beck (Clear

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>271</sup> "Radio Networks," *Mediaweek*, September 3, 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>272</sup> John McConnell, Interview With Author.

Channel-2001), Laura Ingraham (Infinity-2001), and Bill O'Reilly (Infinity-2002), all began syndicating their programs, or in the case of Ingraham and O'Reilly, began new syndicated shows.<sup>273</sup> Others would soon follow.

After Hannity's ascent, and especially once Ingraham and Beck's 9 AM programs emerged, programmers possessed the ability to air a familiar, popular, syndicated block of programming throughout much of the day.<sup>274</sup> In many places, only the morning drive time show remained local, and in some places, national programming even occupied that time slot. By 2007, a Center for American Progress Study characterized 91% of weekday talk radio as conservative.<sup>275</sup>

Programmers were only free to schedule uniformly conservative talk programming because of the 1987 abolition of the Fairness Doctrine. Contrary to conservative claims, the Fairness Doctrine would not have interfered with the rise of the most popular conservative hosts, including Limbaugh, as it only mandated *overall* balance in a station's programming.<sup>276</sup> Yet, it would have prevented the rise of uniformly conservative talk stations.<sup>277</sup> Instead, program

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>273</sup> Pamela Davis, "Beck Muscles Out Dr. Laura at WFLA," *The St Petersburg Times*, September 18, 2001; "Westwood One and Fox News' The Radio Factor With Bill O'Reilly is the Biggest Launch in the History of Talk Radio; To Air On a Record 205 Radio Stations Nationwide," *Business Wire*, May 6, 2002; Miriam Longino, "On Radio WSB taking Boortz and Howard national," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 16, 1998; David Hinckley, "Gallagher: 'Going Back to What I Enjoy and Do Best," *The New York Daily News*, October 26, 1998; "Inside Media," *Mediaweek*, May 21, 2001; David Hinckley, "Twin Cities Show Gets Gotham Dancing to a Brand-New Beat," *The New York Daily* News, February 26, 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>274</sup> After Hannity switched syndicators to iHeartMedia's Premiere Radio in 2008, iHeartMedia stations could air Beck, Limbaugh, and Hannity for 9 hours of programming syndicated by their company after a local morning show.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>275</sup> Marin Cogan, "Bum Rush," *The New Republic*, December 3, 2008, 8-10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>276</sup> The Fairness Doctrine mandated that radio stations operate "on the basis of overall fairness," by "making their facilities available for the expression of contrasting views of all responsible elements in the community on the various issue which may arise.") *Editorializing by Broadcast Licensees*, 13 FCC 1246 (1949), 1250.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>277</sup> The way in which the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine made the uniformly conservative talk format legally possible casts doubt on Nicole Hemmer's argument that the Fairness Doctrine did more to help develop conservative talk radio while in place than it has in the time since its revocation; Hemmer, "Liberals Too Should Reject the Fairness Doctrine," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 25, 2008.

directors would have had to program their stations in the way in which John Mainelli programmed WABC when he scheduled Limbaugh and Bob Grant, alongside the liberal Lynn Samuels, Ed Koch, and Joy Behar.<sup>278</sup>

## **Format Purity**

Building all conservative formats around the six hours of Limbaugh and Hannity made sense, in part because many programmers believed in format purity. They wanted listeners to reliably know what to expect from their stations.<sup>279</sup> Rock music stations did not play country music, and vice-versa.<sup>280</sup> Programmers trained radio listeners to expect format purity and many applied this idiom to talk radio as well.<sup>281</sup> They believed that only talk stations with pure formats could succeed. As CBS Radio Vice President Scott Herman explained, "You don't go to Dominos for a hamburger."<sup>282</sup> Yet, a competing group of programmers challenged this view, arguing that blended talk formats could thrive so long as the station had talented hosts and proper branding.<sup>283</sup>

The history supported this latter position. KGO reigned as the number one station in San Francisco for a whopping thirty-one years with a blended talk format, and other heritage stations, such as KFI in Los Angeles and WOR in New York, flourished in major markets with similar formats. Additionally, in the early 2000s, Florida station WNJO broadcast Limbaugh's program from 12-3 PM and liberal Randi Rhodes' locally based liberal show from 3-6 PM. Hearing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>278</sup> Many conservatives claimed to the contrary that stations would have tired of the constant demands for equal time and scrapped all political talk programs rather than adding liberal ones or providing liberal critics with response time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>279</sup> Mainelli, e-mail message to author, October 20, 2010; Harrison, interview with author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>280</sup> I heard some variation on this theme repeatedly from programmers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>281</sup> Sinton, e-mail message to author, April 25, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>282</sup> Scott Herman, Interview with author, December 26, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>283</sup> Indeed, the majority of the programmers I interviewed indicated that at least under some circumstances liberals and conservatives could succeed on the same station.

Rhodes during his commute home drove Limbaugh crazy. But when he learned that she regularly beat him in the ratings, he stopped questioning her time slot.<sup>284</sup> WNJO demonstrated that even in smaller markets, blended formats could prosper—if properly branded. KFGO in Fargo, North Dakota even achieved the top share of the audience in the country when it aired locally successful liberal talker Ed Schultz and Limbaugh in adjacent time slots. But the station created billboards hyping the two stars and their diametrically opposed views.<sup>285</sup>

Yet, although blended talk stations could succeed, many station executives concluded that a pure, niche format maximized profits (and was easier to construct). The ratings process employed by Arbitron until the mid to late 2000s contributed to this understanding. Arbitron calculated radio ratings by asking select listeners to record their daily listening habits in diaries. This method relied upon memory, which benefitted opinionated, memorable hosts who built loyal followings, such as Limbaugh's dittoheads. Additionally, conservative talk developed a passionate following with extreme loyalty to a station. These listeners would merely draw a line through the broadcast day in their diaries indicating a rabid level of time spent listening (TSL). Programmers discovered that format purity resulted in more reported listening occasions per day and longer TSL, which translated into higher ratings. 287

In Fargo North Dakota, Scott Hennen started a new station with an all conservative talk format, and found that listeners spent an extraordinarily long time listening (or at least reported doing so). While shows on other stations might have had more listeners overall, the listeners to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>284</sup> Hobbs, Interview with Author; Paula Span, "Radio Waves; Talk-show Host Randi Rhodes Joined a New Liberal Network Hoping to Advance Her Career While Shaking Up This Election Season. But Things Haven't Worked Out Exactly as Planned, *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>285</sup> Holland Cooke, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>286</sup> Ratings are now calculated using meters, which record the stations to which people are listening, thereby resulting in greater accuracy. This new methodology is less beneficial to conservative talk radio.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>287</sup> Cantillo, e-mail message to author, January 21, 2013.

Hennen's station listened for longer periods of time, were more affluent, and more highly educated. The station had the best ratings for a new AM station in the market in decades and produced huge ratings for the coveted 25-54 demographic. These audience demographics and longer listening periods translated into higher advertising rates. <sup>288</sup>The emergence of Hannity as a national compliment to Limbaugh catalyzed the development of more all conservative talk stations partly because it left stations with one primary audience for a six hour block. Thus, programmers logically decided to try to build successful stations by maintaining that highly coveted audience throughout the entire day, rather than trying to blend talk formats and build a new audience for other programming. As Hennen noted, successful radio stations gave their primary listening audience no reason to turn the station off. <sup>289</sup>

When Phil Boyce, who believed that stations needed a purpose to succeed, replaced John Mainelli at WABC, he built an all conservative format. The results demonstrated the benefits of format purity. By surrounding Limbaugh with likeminded hosts (Hannity & Mark Levin), he extended the station's TSL. By the time Boyce left WABC eight years later, the station had the highest TSL of any news/talk station in the country. WABC led the local ratings even though local all-news station 1010 WINS had one million extra listeners, because WINS had a TSL of two hours and WABC had a TSL of seven hours.<sup>290</sup>

As an added benefit, conservative talk, which could be easily branded, could flourish at a low cost, because of syndicated programming, the barter method, and the intensely loyal listeners. Programming cost less, while the listener habits led to high advertising rates. In contrast, the kinds of blended stations that thrived—stations like KGO and KFI—generated high

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>288</sup> Hennen, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>290</sup> Phil Boyce, Interview With Author, October 15, 2014.

operating costs. They required large, expensive, top quality news operations,<sup>291</sup> a substantial community involvement, the very best local hosts during most of the broadcast day, such as KFI's Bill Handel or KGO's Ronn Ownes (some of whom earn upwards of a half million to a million dollars per year),<sup>292</sup> and significant advertising (KGO once hired a blimp to fly over the Bay Area for 30 days with a neon KGO sign on the side). Most smaller or medium sized stations simply could not afford such a costly format.

The benefits of consistent programming also illustrated why the initial success of Limbaugh and other conservative talkers, when coupled with the inability of some of the mid-1990s liberal talkers, such as Mario Cuomo, to thrive, shaped the future of the radio industry. Programmers self-admittedly lacked creativity, and they tended to copy whatever format appeared to be working for others in the business.<sup>293</sup> Often, when programmers suggested a format, the first question from their bosses was where was that format working?<sup>294</sup> Thus, as conservative talk prospered, more programmers tried conservative shows, and as those programs succeeded, they subsequently built their stations around conservative talk. Additionally, the audience became trained to expect consistent programming that satisfied them ideologically. When KFI prospered with the conservative Limbaugh and the left leaning Tom Leykis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both shows maintained some crossover audience. By the 2000s, however, listeners had become conditioned to expect ideologically consistent programming. Additionally,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>291</sup> David Hall, Interview with Author; Mickey Luckoff, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>292</sup> Mickey Luckoff, e-mail message to author, January 29, 2013; Robert Unmacht, e-mail message to author, January 26, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>293</sup> Repeatedly when conducting interviews, I heard programmers describe their peers as lemmings, followers, etc. See among others: Walter Sabo, Interview with Author, November 7, 2012; Steve Goldstein, interview with author; Robert Unmacht, interview with author; David Hall, interview with author; Jim Farley, interview with author; Berry and Soberiaj come to a similar conclusion. See *Outrage Industry*, 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>294</sup> Farley, Interview with author.

potential liberal listeners had given up on stations, and in many cases, on the entire AM dial, assuming that all they would find was conservative programming. These listener expectations, in turn, made it harder to succeed with a new blended talk format, because much of the talk radio audience expected all conservative programming. When an attempt to build a blended station failed, programmers took the result as another sign that all conservative programming was the key to success.

### Conclusion

Thus, the history of the rise of talk radio belied the notion that an ideological agenda drove the rise of conservative talk radio. Instead, Rush Limbaugh's success at precisely the moment when AM radio needed a new programming format triggered a series of decisions based upon what programming executives believed would result in the best ratings, the highest advertising rates, and the most revenue. In many cases (especially in the early 1990s), these decisions also reflected a misunderstanding of why Limbaugh built a large following. Programmers could make these decisions because technological advances and regulatory changes made a new type of edgy talk format, which Limbaugh ushered into being, possible. Syndication and consolidation contributed to this process by reducing the incentive and the ability of programmers to innovative, and driving hosts to focus more on national politics. This chain of decisions seemed logical because Limbaugh's success revealed an audience that no one in media had previously identified that yearned for conservative programming that reflected its worldview. This audience and AM radio entered into a mutually beneficial marriage—these consumers wanted conservative content and AM radio needed a new programming format and audience. This audience's rabid consumption of conservative talk radio motivated programmers to build all conservative stations. Yet, these decisions also became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### The Colossus Rises

While blended talk stations could have succeeded, these stations cost more to run, and after the mid to late 1990s, they became less viable as many non-conservatives gave up on talk radio because programming became increasingly conservative and predictable.

Yet, this history raises another question, given the country's political predilections, why, especially as conglomerates acquired more and more stations, did liberal radio not thrive as a separate format, unless bias dictated never giving it a chance? The next chapter answers this question.

# It's The Money Stupid: The Failure of Liberal Political Talk

Liberal talk formats competed on a difficult playing field after Rush Limbaugh colonized talk radio for conservatives beginning in 1988. Nonetheless, liberal radio failed predominately because many liberal hosts during the 1990s and 2000s focused too much on pushing their political agenda and having serious discussions, and not enough on having fun and providing sufficiently stimulating and entertaining radio. This misguided orientation stemmed in part from the origins of many liberal programs in the political world as reactions to the perceived political impact of conservative talk. Paradoxically, conservative talk owed its birth to an opportunity presented by the market. Even when openings in the market inspired liberal radio endeavors, executives plucked hosts from politics or comedy with minimal or no radio experience. Liberal comedians and retired politicians proved to be ill-suited for the free flowing, intimate, non-scripted world of radio. Inexperience contributed to their struggles, as the best hosts, conservative or liberal, had paid their radio dues, often as disc jockeys or news readers, which acclimated them to the unique style required by radio entertainment. The poor fit between some

of the qualities that produced good radio—including pushing boundaries, having easily digestible talking points, and black and white thinking—and liberalism also hampered liberal radio.

Undoubtedly, structural disadvantages, such as low wattage stations and minimal promotional budgets posed obstacles for liberal talk, as did the repercussions of Limbaugh's success. His popularity set off a chain of dominos in the radio business that reduced opportunities for liberal hosts, and eventually drove liberal listeners away from political talk, thereby depriving liberal talk programs of a natural potential constituency. This trend compounded another problem: liberal listeners had a far larger array of media options for finding the news, commentary, and values that they sought. By the time that programmers tried liberal radio on their weak signaled third or fourth AM station, the most logical potential audience had already given up on AM radio, and migrated to National Public Radio (NPR), FM guy talk (i.e. the testosterone driven, often sexual programming offered by hosts like Howard Stern and Greg "Opie" Hughes and Anthony Cumia), or other media sources. This audience fragmentation rendered it imperative for liberal hosts to provide a fun and entertaining product. Listeners seeking serious topical discussion framed by a liberal worldview already received a high quality, satisfying product from NPR. The audience for fire-breathing liberal diatribes also simply was not large enough to sustain a format by themselves. Thus, replicating the irreverent, unpredictable fun of conservative talk offered the only option for overcoming the high hurdles facing liberal talk, and attracting a sufficiently broad audience to achieve commercial success. Overall, soporific talk radio programs—whether liberal or conservative—failed, as discussed in greater detail in chapter one. Unlike conservative talk however, liberal talk never developed a runaway hit to convince executives that the format was viable.

#### The Radio Landscape

Before narrating the saga of liberal talk radio, it is necessary to consider the context in which it emerged. Many in the radio industry, including *Talkers Magazine*'s Michael Harrison and former Premiere Radio President Kraig Kitchin, argue that it is impossible to disaggregate the self-conscious effort on the part of liberals to counter the impact of talkers like Rush Limbaugh from immensely successful liberal media outlets such as NPR, urban talk formats, shock jocks, like Howard Stern, who pushed boundaries, but only sometimes discussed politics, and FM "Morning Zoo" style shows that provided more guy talk<sup>295</sup> and humor than political talk, but which often reflected more liberal cultural values.<sup>296</sup> From a commercial standpoint, considering these formats to be liberal talk had real merit. After all, they satisfied the needs of many liberal listeners. Their success also fragmented the potential audience for opinion driven liberal talk, and thus played a role in its struggles.<sup>297</sup>Yet, labeling them liberal talk occludes (or distorts) the substantial imbalance in opinion and advocacy driven political talk. After 1988, liberal advocacy talk struggled to garner ratings, and most expressly political<sup>298</sup> talk shows on AM radio provided a conservative viewpoint. This imbalance played a substantial role in political and policy battles; apolitical formats and outlets that strived to provide balanced

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>295</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms "Morning Zoo" and "guy talk" broadly to encompass both the sexually driven, male oriented content offered by hosts like Howard Stern and Tom Leykis, but also the stimulating morning shows broadcast in many markets, such as those conducted by Preston Elliot and Steve Morrison in Philadelphia and Tom Griswald and Bob Kevoian nationally. These shows defied easy categorization, as they had a lot of elements of traditional Morning Zoo and guy talk formats, but they were not as sexual as most guy talk programs (and they attracted a significant female audience), nor were they as zany and stunt based as most Morning Zoo programs. Rather they presented largely apolitical discussion that was topical and humorous in nature, along with the occasional stunt/gag; Bill Weston e-mail message to author, May 15, 2013; Steve Goldstein, e-mail message to author, May 23, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>296</sup> Kitchin, Interview with Author, February 13, 2013; Harrison, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>297</sup> Berry and Sobieraj made this argument, though they neglected to include guy talk/Morning Zoo style programs among their list of alternative programming fragmenting the potential audience for liberal talk radio. See Berry and Sobieraj, "Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio," 766.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>298</sup> Even expressly political shows frequently discussed apolitical topics. Politics was, however, their main focus and when hosts discussed apolitical topics, a certain political and cultural perspective shaped the discussion.

discussion of issues did not counterbalance explicit advocacy media in the political realm, even though a liberal worldview shaped their content.

Those who argue that liberal talk radio did just fine despite its struggles nationally (and as a programming format) also point to the significant local success that many individual liberal hosts, including Ed Schultz (ND), Randi Rhodes (FL), Howard Monroe (WV), and Leslie Marshall, experienced. Additionally, hosts including Schultz, Marshall, Stephanie Miller, Thom Hartmann, Alan Colmes, and Bill Press broadcast profitable syndicated shows. However, the number of affiliates for these shows and their cumulative audiences paled in comparison to the audience and affiliate numbers for the top conservative talkers. According to *Pew's* 2013 State of the Media report, five leading conservative talkers had weekly cumulative audiences of more than 8.25 million listeners (Limbaugh topped the list with fifteen million). <sup>299</sup> By contrast, *Talkers Magazine's* May 2015 estimates (*Pew* only provided data on the top 10 hosts, none of whom were liberals) placed Thom Hartmann, Alan Colmes, and Stephanie Miller as the top three liberal hosts, with "minimum weekly cumulative audiences" of two plus million (Hartmann) and 1.75 million (Colmes and Miller). <sup>300</sup>

Finally, conservative talk radio itself, was hardly a monolith.<sup>301</sup> Even many predominately conservative hosts were iconoclasts. For example John Kobylt and Ken Chiampou, noted populist conservative hosts in Los Angeles, favored openly gay military service in the early 1990s, and subsequently supported gay marriage. Additionally, Kobylt voted for John

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>299</sup> Lauren Santhanam, Amy Mitchell, and Kenny Olmstead, "Audio: Digital Drives Listener Experience," in *The State of the News Media 2013*, *Pew Research Center's Project for the Excellence in Journalism*, <a href="http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2013/audio-digital-drives-listener-experience/#talk-radio">http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2013/audio-digital-drives-listener-experience/#talk-radio</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>300</sup> "The Top Talk Radio Audiences: May 2015," *Talkers Magazine*, <a href="http://www.talkers.com/top-talk-radio-audiences/">http://www.talkers.com/top-talk-radio-audiences/</a>, accessed June 1, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>301</sup> Observers labeled Owens and Handel conservative, liberal, and everything in between, depending on the viewpoint of the listener.

Kerry for president in 2004 because he believed that George W. Bush deserved to be fired, and Chiampou supported Barack Obama in 2008.<sup>302</sup> Similarly, as a libertarian, retired, nationally prominent host Neal Boortz opposed Republican positions on cultural issues, including abortion, the origins of homosexuality, creationism vs. evolution, and the effort to keep Terri Schaivo alive.<sup>303</sup> While generally conservative, these hosts were not rigidly partisan and ideological. Overall, spoken word programming clearly had greater diversity than many political pundits acknowledged. Yet, in spite of these caveats, the divergent trajectories of conservative and liberal talk radio is undeniable.

#### Why Liberal Talk Has Failed

Contingency played a major role in the scarcity of liberal hosts on political talk radio. Most industry observers considered Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern to be the two transcendent radio talents of the last thirty years. Stern's program was lewd, sexual, and only occasionally directly focused on politics. Himbaugh, of course, epitomized conservatism. Many programmers concluded that Limbaugh's success derived from his outlook. As a result, they built formats around his program, and hired hosts with similar beliefs in an effort to mimic his success. Similarly, once KVI in Seattle and KSFO in San Francisco prospered as all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>302</sup> Ed Leibowitz, "All the Rage," Los Angeles Magazine, May 1, 2005, http://www.lamag.com/features/2012/05/01/all-the-rage; Kobylt, Interview with Author; Kobylt, E-mail Message to Author, April 3, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>303</sup> See Neal Boortz, *Somebody's Gotta Say It: Government Schools, Burning Flags, and the War On the Individual* (New York: Harper, 2007), 31-39 & Neal Boortz, *Maybe I Should Just Shut Up and Go Away* (Franklin, Tennessee: Carpenter's Son Publishing, 2012), Location 794-795.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>304</sup> Susan Douglas depicted Stern as someone who "hated liberal politics and who insisted that unreconstructed white men get back on top... He was especially determined to defy the liberal sensibilities about race, gender, physical disabilities, and sexual orientation that had emerged from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (304). Yet, even Douglas admitted that Stern had a significant liberal strain. In fact, she argued that he possessed an "incoherent combination of libertarian, liberal, and conservative sensibilities" Douglas, *Listening In*, 302-306; Media Matters Executive Vice President Ari Rabin Havt argued that Stern was, in fact, more liberal than some "liberal" commentators, such as Bill Maher. He contended that Stern favored healthcare reform, supported having a social safety net, and favored affirmative action. Although Stern was more conservative on issues of taxation, and preferred a leaner government, Havt argued that many wealthy Manhattan liberals shared these predilections; Ari Rabin Havt, Interview With Author, June 13, 2013.

conservative talk stations, executives replicated their formats.<sup>305</sup> Radio programmers tended towards "lemming-like"thinking, which turned radio into a "monkey see, monkey do" industry.<sup>306</sup> As a result, the popularity of conservative talk dashed opportunities for liberal talk. The commitment of many programmers to format purity reinforced the inclination to build conservative stations, because they wanted to provide listeners with predictable and uniform programming throughout the day.

This trajectory also drove talented hosts with some liberal proclivities away from political talk. In the early 1990s, Tom Leykis broadcast a political talk show on KFI in Los Angeles. In 1994, he embarked upon a nationally syndicated show, just as programmers began believing that conservatism drove successful talk radio. In this environment, practical considerations motivated Leykis to eschew politics in favor of guy talk. As he explained, "I like to make a living. I'm not in this business to get people elected, or help a political party get elected. I'm in this to make a living...I've never been a liberal or conservative. So I didn't fit that [the need to be a conservative] litmus test. And the easiest way out of that box was to say I am an apolitical host." 307

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>305</sup> Stations that aired predominately conservative talk programming existed before KVI and KSFO, but management did not brand them as offering conservative talk.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>306</sup> Repeatedly when conducting interviews, I heard programmers describe their peers as lemmings, followers, etc. See among others: Walter Sabo, Interview with author, November 7, 2012; Steve Goldstein, interview with author, November 6, 2012; Robert Unmacht, interview with author, January 25, 2013; David Hall, interview with author, September 25, 2012; Jim Farley, interview with author, December 20, 2012; See also: Michael Harrison, Interview With Amy Bolton, Talkers Magazine, November 2004, No. 153, 32; Kevin Casey, "New Media Seminar VII Generates Record Breaking Attendance and Diverse Discussion of Issues in NYC," Talkers Magazine, June 2004, No. 149, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>307</sup> Tom Leykis, Interview With Author, August 19, 2014.

The presumption that all conservative formats best guaranteed success motivated executives to program such formats on the small number of powerful 50,000 Watt<sup>308</sup> AM talk or news/talk stations in each market, whose broadcasts could be heard for hundreds of miles at night. By the time that quality syndicated liberal talk programs started being developed in 2004, many of these stations had longstanding, lucrative, conservative talk formats. Executives had no interest in reprogramming these stations, or damaging their valuable brands, especially considering the dearth of truly successful liberal talk stations. As such, liberal talk aired on stations that were not go-to stations for news,<sup>309</sup> and which often had weak signals, thereby making for less pleasant listening and smaller listening radiuses.

Furthermore, the growth of all conservative formats in the mid to late 1990s alienated the potential audience for liberal talk. While early conservative talk programs received a fair amount of support from liberal listeners,<sup>310</sup> these listeners dropped away as the early entertaining conservative programs changed during the mid-1990s.<sup>311</sup> Especially after ascendent Republicans credited Limbaugh with their takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994, he became less irreverent, more serious, and more strident. Additionally, as conservative programs headed into syndication, the demands of broadcasting nationally, often on stations built around a conservative

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>308</sup> According to BIA/Kelsey's Media Access Pro database, 254 such stations existed during the day, and only 98 at night when federal regulations force many stations to power down their signals. Regulators set allocations of these stations based on population in the 1930s. Other cities had more such stations because of their distance from other major cities. As a result, some big cities, such as New York (with 8) had multiple such stations, whereas others only had one or two. Yet, even some bigger cities, such as Tampa, Florida and San Diego, California had no such stations; BIA/Kelsey's Mark Fratrick conveyed this information to me in a phone call; Mark Fratrick, Phone Call With Author; BIA/Kelsey, "Media Access Pro<sup>TM</sup> for Radio," <a href="http://www.biakelsey.com/Broadcast-Media/Media-Access-Pro/Radio/">http://www.biakelsey.com/Broadcast-Media/Media-Access-Pro/Radio/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>309</sup> Outside of the eleven to twenty-seven cities and small towns that have all news stations, these conservative talk stations were often also the local news station, with talk interspersed with news programs, school closing information, etc; See footnote 212; Nancy Vogt, "Audio: Fact Sheet," in *State of the News Media 2015*, *Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media*, April 29, 2015, <a href="http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/audio-fact-sheet/">http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/audio-fact-sheet/</a>. <sup>310</sup> George Oliva, Interview With Author; Valerie Geller, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>311</sup> By 1996, an Annenberg analysis showed that conservatives constituted close to 70% of Limbaugh's audience. My analysis of Pew data from 1998 puts this figure at 62.2%; See Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 96.

talk theme, forced hosts to remain focused on national politics almost exclusively, and to be more polemical. Thus, liberals who liked the guy talk element of G. Gordon Liddy's show on WJFK in Washington probably recoiled once the program entered into syndication.<sup>312</sup> By the time that liberal talk appeared in a real meaningful way on a national basis in 2004, most of the format's potential audience had given up on AM radio and migrated towards listening to music, NPR, iPods, etc. Between 1996 and 2006, NPR's audience of unique listeners who tuned in at least once per week doubled from 12.5 million to 25 million.<sup>313</sup> The audience that remained for AM talk radio was not particularly conducive to building a thriving liberal talk format.

Finally, there simply was no liberal Limbaugh, which made it far harder to build and sustain successful liberal talk stations.<sup>314</sup> A superstar host not only produced massive revenue and high ratings during his own show. As Talk Radio Networks CEO Mark Masters explained, such a program also served as a ratings "tent pole," that "collateralizes all other shows on its stations with audience while simultaneously acting like a monetizing agent for the entire station."<sup>315</sup> Put more simply, many of Limbaugh's listeners stay tuned to his affiliates after he completed his shift. The resulting "ratings echo" allowed less talented hosts, who could not generate large audiences on their own, to produce strong ratings, which attracted advertisers. Rock stations experienced the same phenomenon with Howard Stern.<sup>316</sup> Thus, the emergence of one liberal superstar host would have allowed stations to thrive, even if the rest of their hosts had less talent,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>312</sup> Jeremy Coleman, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>313</sup> Klineberg, Fighting For Air, 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>314</sup> Ed Schultz polarized the radio industry. Some considered him to have the same level of talent as Limbaugh, others scoffed at that notion. Regardless of one's take, Schultz clearly attained nowhere near the same level of ratings success as Limbaugh; Bill McMahon, Interview With Author; Holland Cooke, Interview With Author; Dave Elswick, Interview With Author; John McConnell, Interview With Author; Randall Bloomquist, Interview With Author; Dennis Kelly, Interview With Author; Brian Jennings, Interview With Author.

<sup>315</sup> Mark Masters, "Guidelines for Successful Talk Radio," Talkers Magazine, no. 150 (July/August 2004): 34-35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>316</sup> Brian Jennings, e-mail message to author, May 7, 2015.

or required on the job training. Without such a ratings tent pole, however, building a successful liberal talk station depended on airing top quality programming in each segment of the day, which required finding four or five top-notch hosts.

Overall, the imitative trend spawned by Limbaugh's popularity, the lack of available 50,000 watt stations, the departure of a potential audience for liberal talk from AM radio, and the lack of a superstar host left liberal radio facing a difficult headwind. Other, bigger factors, however, compounded this bad luck and truly doomed the format.

Most of talk radio's biggest stars had a long history in radio. Many of them actually began their careers as disc jockeys. Rush Limbaugh, Glen Beck, and Sean Hannity all worked their way up through the ranks, as did the most popular liberal hosts, including Alan Colmes, Thom Hartmann, and Stephanie Miller. Many hosts including Hartmann, Limbaugh, and Lars Larson started in radio as teenagers. Even successful hosts who came from other fields started in local radio as weekend hosts, or analysts, including Bill Handel, Hugh Hewitt, Bill Press, and Michael Smerconish. Programmers trained these talents, who learned the ropes in relatively low stakes environments before being thrust into the national spotlight. They understood that radio was first and foremost an entertainment medium.

Yet, most of the major liberal radio initiatives focused on hiring celebrity neophytes who executives knew would receive lots of initial publicity and who they expected to produce immediate hits, but who had little radio experience.<sup>317</sup> Democracy Radio, spearheaded by Tom Athans and Paul Fiddick, was the lone exception to this rule, and it launched Ed Schultz and Stephanie Miller, two of the most successful liberal talkers, into syndication. The effort to build liberal radio in the early 2000s splintered because Athans did not want to hire Al Franken due to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>317</sup> Joe Getty, Interview With Author.

his lack of radio experience. Athans believed that liberals failed to appreciate the specialized skill required by radio broadcasting. They assumed that anyone who gave good speeches could do three hours of daily extemporaneous radio successfully. As Ari Rabin-Havt, the Vice President of Media Matters and a Sirius-XM host analogized, many viewed radio broadcasting in the way that people viewed playing drums. They saw a drum set and thought that it might be fun to go pound away (in reality, producing good music required years of practice). <sup>318</sup> By contrast, both Rabin-Havt and Athans viewed radio as a craft learned through years of experience. Athans believed that while celebrities drew attention to liberal radio, they would not have staying power without the skill cultivated through experience. <sup>319</sup>

The 1990s provided ample support for this theory, as Mario Cuomo, Alan Dershowitz, Gary Hart, Jim Hightower and Jerry Brown all launched talk shows amidst much fanfare, and all of which failed, primarily because they bored people.<sup>320</sup> These prominent liberals brought a serious, low key, and patronizing (or at least it could be perceived that way), tone to talk radio. Cuomo explained that his approach required "a paragraph and not a slogan." <sup>321</sup> David Rimmer, who helped to launch Cuomo and Dershowitz's programs for Sony, admitted that the shows proved to be less entertaining than executives had hoped they would be. Even Jon Sinton, one of the founders of the liberal Air America radio network, believed that Cuomo and Brown failed as radio hosts because they bored listeners.<sup>322</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>318</sup> Ari Rabin-Havt, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>319</sup> Athans, Interview With Author.

<sup>320</sup> Jim Farley, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>321</sup> Howe Verhovek, "Out of Politics, But Still Talking;" Paul Colford, interview with author, November 18, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>322</sup> Sinton, e-mail message to author, May 1, 2012.

These shows launched with high expectations, many of which were unrealistic.

Programmer Laurie Cantillo convinced Hart to do a one hour taped show on Sunday nights on KOA in Denver. Immediately, the media hyped it as a potential liberal answer to Limbaugh. Hart's debut merited front page *New York Times* coverage. The newspapers yearned for a fight, but rather than matching Limbaugh's irreverence, Hart focused on rising above the fray and talking about meaningful issues. Too often this approach (like Cuomo's) resulted in ponderous programming that might have appealed to the C-SPAN audience, but did not entertain. ABC radio executive Frank Raphael tried to convince Cuomo to do a daily program (his show aired weekly), and tried to get both Cuomo and former Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower to lighten up and have fun on the air. Agriculture Commissioner Jim Magazine's Michael Harrison observed, many more conservatives failed over the years in talk radio than liberals (often because they, too, failed to entertain). Yet, because of the hype surrounding many of these liberal shows and the hosts's celebrity, the failures were more visible, and they convinced many programmers that the entire genre could not succeed.

Air America, the most ballyhooed attempt to build liberal radio, made a similar mistake by hiring all but one of its initial hosts from outside of radio.<sup>326</sup> Sinton and Mark Walsh, Air America's initial President and CEO, both understood that successful radio had to entertain. Thus, they imported stars from comedy, which seemingly offered better odds of producing fun, engaging programs. However, as Alan Colmes (who has performed standup comedy) noted real

323 Cantillo, E-mail Message to Author, January 21, 2013; Howe Verhovek, "Out of Politics, But Still Talking."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>324</sup> Farley, Interview With Author, December 20, 2012.

<sup>325</sup> Michael Harrison, "The Importance of Air America," Talkers Magazine, no. 147 (April 2004): 43 & 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>326</sup> Air America did attempt to put a secondary or tertiary host on each show with some sort of radio experience. Nonetheless, the star of most of Air America's shows lacked prior radio experience.

Unlike prewritten half-hour standup routines, a host largely performed extemporaneously for fifteen hours a week. Whereas standup comics might hone a ten minute bit, which they tweaked and repeated in each show, talk radio hosts talked for hours on end about the same topics and themes, and might discuss a topic several days in a row with the same audience. Additionally, comics need to be wired, not radio-relaxed. Thus, *Time*'s Richard Corliss concluded that comics were precisely the wrong people to host on the radio.<sup>328</sup> In fact, as radio humorist Phil Hendrie observed, only Steve Harvey successfully transitioned from standup comedy to radio.<sup>329</sup>

Both the unsuccessful comedians and former politicians failed to understand that talk radio existed to entertain. As producer Peter Ogburn noted, at his best, Limbaugh entertained everyone from liberals, to conservatives, to satanists.<sup>330</sup> But instead of trying to mimic this trait, many of failed liberal hosts prioritized either educating their audience, neutralizing the political benefit of conservative talk radio, or advancing their political agenda, which resulted in boring programs.<sup>331</sup> Programmers David Bernstein and John Mainelli both described liberal hosts as being on a mission; Bernstein believed that they tried to emulate what they saw in conservative

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>327</sup> Alan Colmes, Interview With Author; Interview With Alan Colmes, *Talkers Magazine*, no. 149 (June 2004): 44-45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>328</sup> Richard Corliss, "Why Air America Will Be Missed, " *Time* Magazine, January 21, 2010, <a href="http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1955848,00.html">http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1955848,00.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>329</sup> Phil Hendrie, Interview With Author, July 8, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>330</sup> Peter Ogburn, Interview With Author, June 11, 2013.

<sup>331</sup> Walter Sabo, Interview with Author, November 7, 2012; Interestingly, as Alison Dagnes explained, the Fox News show, *The Half Hour News Hour*, which aimed to be a conservative equivalent of *The Daily Show* and to rectify the ideological imbalance in political comedy (which was the inverse of the imbalance in talk radio), failed because the political argument trumped the humor. The satirists on Fox found their best material rejected by executives who considered it too controversial. Both ventures strove to rectify a perceived ideological imbalance in an entertainment medium. But attempting to mimic the opposition's success, and neutralize any political advantage in an entertainment medium might result in losing sight of the need to prioritize entertainment. See Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2012), 203-205.

radio, and did it without a sense of humor to drive their points home.<sup>332</sup> They misunderstood the entertaining nature of conservative talk, in part because to their liberal ears, conservative talk lacked humor, and often targeted sympathetic minority groups for abuse. Gabe Hobbs once asked Al Franken if his goal on Saturday Night Live had been to elect Jimmy Carter, trying to illustrate that talk radio had the same goal as entertainment television. Franken replied, however, that his radio program was different.<sup>333</sup> Franken's longtime friend and producer Billy Kimball argued that the staff at Air America consciously viewed themselves as creating left wing talk radio, as opposed to an entertainment network, which "would have been a radically different project."<sup>334</sup> Although Kimball and Franken knew that their show had to be entertaining, entertainment was not their top priority.

Rather, Franken and colleague Janeane Garofalo respectively argued that Air America's mission was to take back the country from the right wing, especially the Bush Administration, and to "give voice to the millions of Americans that are left out of national conservation." <sup>335</sup> Fellow host Sam Seder even acknowledged that the larger audience offered by terrestrial radio (Seder now hosts a successful podcast) allowed him to embrace much more activist oriented goals because he could actually affect politics. <sup>336</sup> Air America General Counsel David Goodfriend bemoaned the way that the networks' comedians tried to lecture their audience. He remembered screaming at his radio, "Be funny Al. Be funny Janeane:"<sup>337</sup> This mission based,

<sup>332</sup> Bernstein, Interview With Author; Mainelli, E-Mail Message to Author, November 21, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>333</sup> Hobbs, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>334</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>335</sup> Simon Houpt, "Black Community Turned Off Air America," *The Globe and Mail*, April 3, 2004; "Fighting Words," *Nightline*, ABC News, April 1, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>336</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author, May 13, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>337</sup> Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

politically driven approach failed, because as programmer Valerie Geller observed, talk radio was pleasure, not school.<sup>338</sup> Indeed, programmers Bill Hess and Mason Lewis argued that conservative radio experienced more success because conservatives willingly had fun on the radio. Hess cited Limbaugh's parodies as an example, and posited that liberal hosts hesitated to have similar fun because they cared so much about their ideology (Mainelli pointed out that many of the dogmatic conservatives hired in the wake of Limbaugh's popularity failed to entertain for precisely the same reason).<sup>339</sup>

Even some of the more talented and successful liberal hosts, including Randi Rhodes and Mike Malloy, often served as the verbal equivalent of a brush fire.<sup>340</sup> On her April 4th, 2005 show, Rhodes engaged in a lengthy argument with a caller about the Iraq War. She berated him, cut him off, and offered conspiracy theories. When the caller noted the experience of the Bush foreign policy team, Rhodes interjected, "in war crimes? All those people are miserable failures. Those people are responsible for mass graves. Those people are responsible for crack being in the United States. Those people lied to Congress." She referred to the caller as crazy, and a freak. She posited that the Bush team wanted the oil fields of Iraq because they were, "oil men for God's sake and defense contractors."<sup>341</sup> Similarly, the documentary *Left of the Dial*, included audio of Rhodes taking a call from a woman who believed that Theresa Heinz Kerry gave money

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>338</sup> Geller, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>339</sup> Mainelli, e-mail to message to author, November 21, 2010; Hess's analysis was somewhat unfair, in that some liberals, including Stephanie Miller, used parodies on their shows; Marc Fisher, "Air America: In the Throes of Victory?," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2006; Ostrow,"The Rush to Righteousness."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>340</sup> Malloy and Rhodes epitomized the heavy use of outrage that Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey M Berry found to be prevalent in talk radio; Sobieraj and Berry, "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," *Political Communication* 28, no 1: 19-41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>341</sup> Randi Rhodes, *The Randi Rhodes Show*, April 4, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

to Hizbollah. When the caller repeated her charge and refused to cite a source, Rhodes started shrieking at her, "HEYYYYYY, Bitch. Where. Name the source. Are you just crazy? Please up the dosage honey. Take the pills. Honey, take the pills. Oh wow, What a witch. What a witch." <sup>342</sup> On another show, she remarked, "put [President] Bush on the short yellow bus. He is a teletubby. The only place where I'd feel comfortable with George Bush as leader is Sesame Street." <sup>343</sup> If anything, Malloy could be even more caustic than Rhodes. <sup>344</sup> He identified as a social Democrat and admitted that his program grew harsher as his politics moved leftward over the years. His endeavored to "offset the tide of lies and deception that are put out twenty-four seven by teabaggers, right wingers, and conservatives." Malloy was dedicated to "fighting the tide of BS," because he believed that every conservative was a "liar and a coward." <sup>345</sup> This sort of caustic commentary made it easy to understand both why Malloy developed a devoted and passionate following, but also why radio executive Brian Jennings described much of liberal radio as "acid reflux to listen to." <sup>346</sup>

Hosts like Malloy and Rhodes had plenty of counterparts in conservative radio. After all, the best talk radio produced controversy and pushed the boundaries of propriety. But tone was critically important. Hosts were more likely to avoid backlash or banishment to less desirable

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>342</sup> I transcribed this exchange from Left of the Dial at minute 84. See "Left of the Dial: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of America's First Liberal Talk Radio Network, Air America Radio, directed by Patrick Farrelly and Kate O'Callaghan, 2005, (HBO Documentary Films, 2005), DVD or Youtube, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjyBTFn2sRc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjyBTFn2sRc</a>, posted on February 6, 2015.

Randi Rhodes, *The Randi Rhodes Show* May 4, 2005—[Part 3/5], (Youtube Video) May 4, 2004, posted January 18, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qi9YCIncZV4 (accessed June 9, 2015). This remark comes in the 3rd part of the show, at approximately the :55 second mark.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>344</sup> See, for example, the quotes spotlighted in by Sean Hannity, on November 28th, 2012 and January 30th, 2013; Sean Hannity, "Interview With Brian Maloney," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired on November 28, 2012, TV Transcript accessed via Factiva; Sean Hannity, "Interview With Brian Maloney," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired on January 30, 2013, TV Transcript accessed via Factiva.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>345</sup> Malloy, Interview with Author, January 9. 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>346</sup> Jennings, Interview With Author.

entertaining programs, and their comments seemed to be in jest. A track record of zaniness and humor did not provide immunity from the consequences of crossing the line. Management suspended local stars John Kobylt and Ken Chiampou for insensitive remarks, and Rush Limbaugh lost advertisers after calling law student Sandra Fluke, "a slut." Nonetheless, hosts who pushed the limits regularly in a stylistically harsh manner experienced less success, or found success at night, when audiences were smaller. Such controversial comments also repelled blue chip advertisers who avoided association with potentially offensive statements, regardless of a host's ratings. Rhodes epitomized the greater challenges facing polemicists. She had a lucrative syndication deal with Premiere Radio. Yet, her abrasive style made her polarizing among programmers, and might have limited the number of markets in which her program aired, as well as the size of her audience.

Malloy and Rhodes actually reproduced an element of conservative radio that eluded most liberal hosts. In contrast to the cerebral style proffered by many liberal hosts, Sean Hannity aimed to be outrageous in order to "catch people and get them to listen." KSFO was, "politically incorrect and proud of it." This slogan exemplified the ethos of conservative talk radio. Although successful political talk radio was not inherently conservative, it was anti-

<sup>347</sup> Dan Sewell, "Why Has Talk Radio Become Such a Force? Let's Go To The Phones," *The Associated Press Political Service*, March 20, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>348</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Has Talk Radio Lost Its Voice?; Conservative Gabbers Are Having Trouble Mustering the Troops," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1995.

establishment and controversial.<sup>349</sup> Conservative host John Kobylt, who was far more populist rebel than party loyalist, argued that conservatives experienced greater success in talk radio in part because they were willing to be shocking, outrageous, and polarizing, something that he believed that liberal comedians did on television, but liberal talk radio hosts were unwilling to do.<sup>350</sup> That hesitancy derived in part from the fundamental ethos of liberalism; as Alan Colmes argued, liberals preached "tolerance, love and compassion."<sup>351</sup> This foundation made it harder for liberal talkers to resort to edgy humor or boundary challenging characterizations that threatened to offend someone. As conservative programmer Tom Tradup put it, liberals did not want to alienate people.<sup>352</sup>

The fundamental misunderstanding of their mission might also help to explain why liberal radio failed to contain the outrageous element that propelled left-leaning late night comedy shows (late night time slots made it easier to employ sexual innuendo and coarse language). Late night television hosts, such as *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart, clearly prioritized

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>349</sup> Alison Dagnes and Jeffrey P Jones explain that antiestablishmentarianism also drove good political satire and comedy. Good satire attacked the economic and politically powerful and aimed at questioning power structures. Although Dagnes associated this kind of thinking with liberalism (she noted that conservatives supported established power structures), culturally, a certain liberal sensibility governed much of what could be said in polite company. Although conservatism reigned politically and economically over much of the last half century, liberalism remained culturally ascendent. Indeed, Dagnes quoted conservative comedian Nick DiPaolo as saying that even conservative audiences got uncomfortable with off color jokes because they did not want to be construed as being racist or misogynist for laughing out loud (159). This point might indicate why conservative entertainers thrived in talk radio while struggling in comedy, whereas liberals have had the inverse experience. Conservative humor worked better on talk radio because people alone in cars or elsewhere looking for companionship consumed most talk radio. By themselves, conservatives could freely laugh at such humor. Furthermore, because of their affinity for the powerful and the status quo societally, conservatives could only rely on the cultural realm to produce antiestablishmentarian material, which, as noted by DiPaolo, left them vulnerable to provoking awkward audience reactions and/or not being funny in comedy clubs. Finally, Dagnes noted that the liberal environment in which most comedy was produced might leave conservatives feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome. Talk radio, by contrast, proved to be a haven for conservative entertainers. As such, they might be drawn to talk radio at the expense of careers in comedy. Dagnes, A Conservative Walks Into a Bar, see especially xiv-40 and 154-164 and Jones, Entertaining Politics, see especially 87 and 235-252.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>350</sup> John Kobylt, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>351</sup> Donna Petrozzello, "Conservative Talk Shows Drown Out Liberal Voice: Success of Limbaugh, Liddy, and Grant Has Been Tough Act For Liberal Talk Shows to Follow," *Broadcasting and Cable*, June 19, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>352</sup> Tom Tradup, Interview With Author.

entertainment. While they used current events as a foil or a vehicle, they broadcast on entertainment channels, and spent their days writing jokes. Stewart explicitly rejected a more overt political/advocacy based role. During his 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity, he eschewed even encouraging attendees to vote in the midterm elections later that week.<sup>353</sup>

Additionally, the audience might have contributed to the hesitancy of liberal radio hosts to push boundaries and offer outrageous content in several ways. As former Media Matters President Eric Burns explained, liberals held their own to a higher standard, and experienced more skittishness about charges of hypocrisy than conservatives. While conservatives ignored such charges, liberals served up the scalp of the offending liberal on a silver platter before conservatives could even demand it. For example, in 2008, Air America suspended Rhodes, leading to her departure from the network, after she called Hillary Clinton and former Vice Presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro "[expletive] whores" during a comedy routine at an offair event sponsored by her San Francisco affiliate. Either Rhodes' remarks offended Air America's executives, or they feared a backlash from investors, listeners, interest groups, and/or advertisers. They suspended Rhodes even though her remarks occurred off-air, and in spite of her large fan base, which demanded her return. Stock At the time, Rhodes was Air America's most popular host, and Sam Seder believed that by triggering her departure, executives sacrificed the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>353</sup> James Hohmann, Marin Cogan, and Byron Tau, "Democrats Can't Ride Jon Stewart's Wave," *Politico*, October 30, 2010, <a href="http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1010/44432.html">http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1010/44432.html</a>.

<sup>354</sup> Burns, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>355</sup> Rhodes's remarks targeted Democratic power brokers, as late night comedy shows often did. Indeed, Dagnes found that these shows mocked anyone in power. Though the hosts leaned left, they targeted both liberal and conservative politicians, although often they targeted liberal politicians for being insufficiently strong and resolute. See Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, 50-77; David Hinckley, "Rhodes Quits Air America Over Sorry State Of Off-Air Remarks," *The New York Daily News*, April 11, 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>356</sup> Charles Passy, "Talk Radio: The Big Business of Big Mouths; Rabid Fans Fuel Rabid Debate- and Ratings," *The Palm Beach Post*, May 10, 2008; David Hinckley, "Rhodes Quits Air America Over Sorry State Of Off-Air Remarks," *The New York Daily News*, April 11, 2008.

network's viability.<sup>357</sup> Rhodes' suspension demonstrated how challenging it was for liberal hosts to push the boundaries of propriety in the way that the best conservative hosts did.

Further, some questioned whether liberal audiences wanted the same sort of provocative entertainment-based radio that appealed to conservatives. Marc Maron experienced blowback when he offered provocative political comedy on his Air America morning show. He felt like the audience sought engagement, rather than entertainment. They wanted to feel like they were learning something and being part of a fight. They preferred the matter of fact style of NPR to his brand of liberally inspired political satire. Maron's experience raised the possibility that a fundamental divide existed within the liberal audience making it difficult to build sufficiently broad appeal. 358

Phil Hendrie offered a blueprint for humorous, entertaining radio that offered a certain liberal cultural perspective—Hendrie avoided targeting minorities because he found them to be sympathetic figures. But Hendrie experienced success on both liberal and conservative talk stations by explicitly avoiding partisan politics, and instead focusing on micro-level, neighborhood politics. Hendrie targeted characters (all of which he created and voiced) who would irk most listeners. Examples included a "pompous ass" housewife, an entitled business owner, and a laborer who thought that he was put upon by the forces of capitalism, but in reality just drank too much beer and smoked too much marijuana.<sup>359</sup>

In addition to its reticence to offend, another aspect of the liberal worldview failed to match the demands of good talk radio as effectively as the conservative outlook. Liberal views

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>357</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>358</sup> Marc Maron, Interview With Author, August 26, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>359</sup> Hendrie. Interview With Author.

tended to be more heterodox and complex, which is not conducive to great talk radio.<sup>360</sup> As programmer Jeremy Coleman explained, great talk radio was simple, and presented easy to understand, absolute positions that hosts essentially repeated like greatest hits on music radio.<sup>361</sup> This formula fit better with conservative ideas because they were far easier to condense into a bumper sticker or a soundbite.<sup>362</sup> Moreover, liberal hosts lacked a hymnal from which to preach in the manner that conservative hosts did. As Paul Fiddick perceived the contrast, liberals loved to debate and discuss issues, whereas conservatives believed in absolute truths, and saw the world in black and white; indeed, Limbaugh titled his first book *The Way Things Ought to Be*.<sup>363</sup> Conservatives wanted to explain why they were right, and why anyone who disagreed needed to convert to their way of thinking. This certainty and forcefulness made for better radio. Ed Schultz thrived precisely because he channeled this conservative model, pounding his fist and talking succinctly.<sup>364</sup>

By contrast, the nuance of liberal policies and the liberal embrace of relativism—a perspective disdained by conservatives—invited far more discussion than declaration.<sup>365</sup> As

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>360</sup> Randall Bloomquist, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>361</sup> Coleman, Interview With Author; Ironically, the same ideological traits that made conservatism a better fit for talk radio, might make liberalism a better fit for satire and political comedy. Alison Dagnes argued that satire eschewed the absolutism of conservatism and lived in the grays; Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>362</sup> Tom Taylor, Interview With Author; William G Mayer disputed this explanation, arguing, "for ever simple-minded conservative slogan there is an equally vacuous catch-phrase on the Left. For every Republican who has ever claimed that 'big government' is the cause of all our problems there is a Democrat who thinks that all Republican policies are 'tax cuts for the rich' and sweetheart deals for big business." As Mayer noted, liberals could caricature the Republican philosophy and express what they opposed in short catchphrases. However, explaining what Democrats supported often required far more nuance to explain. By contrast, conservatives favored low taxes, robust defense, less regulation, traditional moral values, etc; Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative," 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>363</sup> Alan Colmes, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>364</sup> Jeremy Coleman, Interview with Author; Tom Taylor, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>365</sup> Clyde Haberman, "Left? Right? At This Hour, Who Can Tell," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2004; Bill Press, *Toxic Talk*, 239; Randall Bloomquist, Interview with Author; Alan Colmes, Interview With Author; Eric Burns, Interview with Author; Josh Gottheimer, Interview With Author, May 31, 2013.

Mark Walsh described, "The Republicans see everything as binary, black or white'... 'We think the world is a little more analog: There's some gray in between the binary stances."<sup>366</sup> On radio, this complexity came off as wishy-washiness. As host Jim Bohannon explained, liberal hosts, such as Cuomo, often made cogent points and then said something like on the other hand, and proceeded to demolish their own point. According to Bohannon, radio listeners wanted demigods;<sup>367</sup> in a way, they listened for a reality-based soap opera, in which the hosts represented good, and the opposition was evil.<sup>368</sup>

One final mismatch existed between talk radio and liberal perceptions of the world.

Radio's personal, intimate nature dictated that genuine emotion drove the best radio discussions.

Talk radio appealed to the angry, frustrated, and disillusioned members of society. Reflecting their insular nature and their conception of fairness, which emphasized proportionality, conservative grievances fit better in this environment because they were more personal in nature (the government wanted to take away MY guns, the government gave MY hard earned money to people who were less deserving, affirmative action hurt my kids's chances of getting into college,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>366</sup> Rachel Donadio, "Lefty Radioheads Bite Back," *New York Observer*, January 12, 2004; Gary Hart extrapolated further on this point in discussing liberals' lack of success in talk radio. He argued, "by definition, the reformer, the progressive, the liberal, whatever you want to call it, doesn't see the world in blacks and whites, but in plaids and grays. There never is a single simple answer. It is always a set of interrelated policies;" Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative," 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>367</sup> Bohannon, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>368</sup> To an extent, these differences in thinking reflected the fundamentally competing visions of morality and moral authority explained by James Davison Hunter in *Culture Wars* and Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind*. Black and white thinking reflected both orthodoxy, which credited a transcendent moral authority with setting out immutable and unchanging principles to guide society, and an emphasis upon the moral foundations of authority, sanctity, and tradition. The focus on nuance, by contrast, dovetailed with progressivism, which defined moral authority "by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism." Progressives viewed truth as an ever unfolding process. Their search for truth might explain why liberals looked for more balanced discussions of issues and why they had more tolerance for nuance—immutable rules left little room for nuance. Their greater emphasis on the moral foundations of care and fairness also fit with liberals' attempt to respect and understand both sides of an issue; James Davision Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991, see especially 31-51; Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 150-216.

regulations hurt MY business, etc).<sup>369</sup> Even many of the micro-level, local conservative complaints about things such as sex education, strip clubs near churches, and the nanny state were deeply personal in nature. Most talk radio listeners related to and/or shared these complaints. Sam Seder argued that conservative hosts could explain how almost any news threatened their listeners and their way of life.<sup>370</sup> Deeply held religious convictions (which, in turn, linked to one's eternal fate) drove many seemingly more abstract conservative stances, such as the "right to life." By contrast, reflecting their understanding of fairness, which prioritized equality, liberal grievances were often less personal (people were starving, a growing wealth gap existed, the wealthy did not pay their fair share, allowing snowmobiles in a national park endangered the gray wolf, etc). These complaints, while often provoking a great deal of passion and personal investment, were not as personal. The poor person suffering the most from the wealth gap was unlikely to call into a radio show (the greater number of minorities suffering from these inequalities might contribute, however, to the success of liberal Hispanic and African American talk radio formats). Thus, liberal talk radio devolved more into policy discussion rather than the intimate, emotional, personal conversations that produced the best talk radio.

These mindset differences reduced the audience for opinion driven liberal talk radio in several ways. First, conservatives had far less of a desire to listen to liberal talk than liberals did to conservative talk.<sup>371</sup> As Alan Colmes put it, the audience for talk radio did not want to hear

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>369</sup> Jonathan Haidt explains that conservatives fretted about their own groups, whereas liberals focused universally. For conservatives, the Liberty/oppression moral foundation related to government restriction upon freedom (including global governments restricting the United States). They sacralized liberty, not equality. By contrast, liberals focused on equality, sometimes even to the extent of advocating for equality of outcomes, and their conception of this foundation focused on fairness for underdogs, victims, and powerless groups. To conservatives, by contrast, fairness demanded proportionality, not equality. See Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 204-211.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>370</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>371</sup> Kevin Casey, "New Media Seminar VII Generates Record Breaking Attendance and Diverse Discussion of Issues in NYC," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 149 (June 2004): 10; Sam Seder, Interview with Author.

two liberals "french kissing on the radio." Some successful liberal hosts, including Colmes and Leslie Marshall, attracted conservative audiences who wanted to scream at them. But they benefitted from hosting on predominately conservative stations, which produced more conservative callers, and thus more conflict, which created good radio.<sup>372</sup> Alas, conservatives who wanted to scream at the radio had more trouble hating the nuance offered by many liberal hosts. Unfortunately for liberal radio, most liberals also preferred not to hear liberal opinions spouted at them.

Rather, they preferred in depth discussion and analysis, shaped by their liberal worldview, but containing neutral analysis and a balanced perspective—similar to what NPR and the mainstream media delivered. Ari Rabin-Havt believed that this style appealed to liberals because while conservatives listened to reaffirm the rectitude of their views, many liberals were listening to find out why their ideas were correct. They wanted information, not combativeness.<sup>373</sup> In fact, many programmers considered NPR to constitute left of center radio precisely because it siphoned off a portion of the audience that might otherwise welcome liberal talk. NPR's Morning Edition had a larger listener base than any television morning show, or any commercial radio program. NPR left no gap to be filled in the way that conservative radio satisfied conservatives's pent up desire to hear their viewpoint espoused in the media.<sup>374</sup> The nuance and depth preferred by liberals fit poorly with the fast paced world of commercial radio, in part because NPR satisfied listeners looking for lengthy, in depth issue discussions.

<sup>372</sup> Colmes, Interview With Author; Marshall, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>373</sup> Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj support Rabin Havt's observation. After discussing a conservative interviewee, they note that outrage television provided viewers with "social connections, a sense of being well informed, and the reassurance that they are right." They also note that outrage programs create "empowerment zones that bolster viewers' and listeners' self-assuredness;" Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 132 & 143; Ari Rabin Havt, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>374</sup> Gabe Hobbs, Interview With Author, Jack Swanson, Interview With Author, JD Hayworth, Interview With Author; Jim Bohannon, Interview With Author.

Lending credence to this understanding of liberal radio's difficulties, Jason Zengerle observed in *The New Republic* that urban talk radio (which discussed issues of interest, including politics, to the African American community) thrived as a left of center genre because many African Americans found their views to be absent from the mainstream media. This perception left them hungry for media that espoused their ideas and catered to their needs.<sup>375</sup> Generally, most liberals did not share this sentiment.<sup>376</sup> In fact, one reason that the early 2000s represented the strongest growth period for liberal talk radio was because the state of the country infuriated liberals (nothing benefitted talk radio more than a controversial president from the opposite party). They also resented the media's coverage of the tangled aftermath of the 2000 election and the Bush Administration, especially after 9/11.

Randi Rhodes, who generated strong national ratings after debuting on Air America in 2004, epitomized the role that anti-mainstream media sentiment played in talk radio success. During her May 4th, 2004 program, Rhodes argued that Republicans controlled the media. She mentioned receiving many calls from Democrats who felt as though the media excluded their voices and perspectives. She accused the media of being "bought off" and "paid for." In response to a caller who labeled the media "really right wing," Rhodes explained, "He's [President Bush] got a propaganda machine going on here. There is no doubt that the media is a wholly owned subsidiary of the White House. All the business that the media has that's in front of the Republican House and the Republican Senate, and the Republican White House, and the Republican FCC is not going to be disturbed by anything like voters." She also explicitly equated

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>375</sup> Jason Zengerle, "Talking Back," *The New Republic* 230, no. 5: 19-25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>376</sup> See Sobieraj and Berry, Understanding the Rise of Talk Radio, 766 and Mayer, "Why Talk Radio is Conservative, 98-101; My account differs from these scholarly depictions by offering an explanation of why liberals were more likely to be satisfied with NPR and the mainstream media, and less likely to crave explicitly liberal radio.

the media ignoring African American sentiments and liberal ones, observing, "I know now what it's like to be black in America. I didn't before, but I do now. I don't see anyone in the media who sounds like me."377

Liberal talk radio provided an outlet for people who shared these sentiments. However, the product was not good enough to sustain strong ratings and/or to lure a sufficiently big audience to overcome built in disadvantages. Even when the product generated decent ratings, it lacked financial viability nationally. Additionally, the liberal frustration that propelled Rhodes' success also spawned the blogosphere, which offered liberals an alternative to the mainstream media and talk radio. The liberal hunger for talk radio might have diminished as the dissatisfaction with the media waned, the liberal blogosphere took off, and MSNBC moved towards providing liberals with their own cable television network.

#### A Mountain To Climb: Obstacles to Overcome

Liberal talk's narrow, ideological branding also damaged its financial viability. Most conservative talk stations had non-ideological slogans like "The Big Talker," or "The Great Voice of the Great Lakes." By contrast, corporate station owners and Air America's executives branded liberal talk as progressive talk. Air America's management wanted to create a strong, visible, progressive brand to convey that the network offered a place where listeners could be loudly and proudly progressive. David Goodfriend questioned whether the ratings would have been as good without that pitch to listeners. Heart Media's Gabe Hobbs argued that he tried to persuade Air America's executives that they created an excellent neutral moniker, and should

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>377</sup> Randi Rhodes, "The Randi Rhodes Show Part 4/5," (Youtube Video) May 4, 2004, posted on January 18, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\_uoI\_qbLwk&list=PLCEB042A778EEAE87, accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>378</sup> Tom Athans, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>379</sup> David Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

brand themselves less ideologically. However, they insisted on becoming an explicitly ideological brand.<sup>380</sup>

This branding drew attention to Air America and helped the network to connect with scores of frustrated progressives who provided a ratings base. In a narrowcasting medium in which a small, but passionate, audience could translate into a viable business, this branding might have been a sensible gamble (especially had Air America's executives properly monetized the internet side of their business). Yet, this branding also reduced the format's appeal to non-liberals, thereby narrowing the potential path for success. It also probably made it harder for progressive stations to sell advertising, given advertisers' conservative proclivities, and how many companies shied away from advertising on all but the strongest controversial programs out of fear of alienating potential customers.

Many in radio blamed structural disadvantages, including weak signaled stations and small promotional budgets for the failure of liberal radio. Yet, while these disadvantages undoubtedly hampered liberal radio, they were not a major contributor to its troubles, nor were they insurmountable. The history of conservative talk radio supported this interpretation. In many markets, Rush Limbaugh initially broadcast on small stations with weak signals. Executive Dennis Kelly recalled spending a year and half trying to convince Limbaugh's management to move his show from a small Little Rock station, KBIS, to Kelly's larger signaled KARN.<sup>381</sup> Similarly, Limbaugh debuted on stations based in distant suburbs in both Houston and St Louis

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>380</sup> Hobbs' account fit with how proudly Air America wore the label of progressive talk. However, Tom Athans remembered trying to convince Hobbs to brand the broader format more neutrally, and finding Hobbs to be reticent because such neutral branding would have put progressive talk stations in competition with Clear Channel's larger, successful conservative talk stations. Either way, the origins of the decision mattered far less than its impact; Athans, Interview with Author; Hobbs, E-mail message to author, March 19, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>381</sup> Dennis Kelly, Interview with Author,

with minuscule ratings, no money for promotion, and weak signals.<sup>382</sup> Yet, as Limbaugh gained popularity and notoriety, his program advanced to larger stations. Similarly, had progressive radio provided high quality content that garnered a sufficiently large following, station owners would have shifted the format to stations with larger signals, offered a larger promotional budget, devoted more resources to selling advertising, etc.

Nonetheless, these structural disadvantages hindered the growth of the liberal talk format. iHeartMedia helped Air America gain clearance on 100 stations very quickly, but only three of them (Los Angeles, Portland and Denver), did not suffer from signal deficiencies and high-dial positions. Broadcasting on weak signaled stations that occupied high dial positions (i.e. 1400 or 1500) often meant listening through static and low volume. Marshal noted, you lost the signal of some progressive stations by driving down the street. She explained that larger signals equalled larger reach and a larger potential audience. This audience attracted more advertisers, who saw more potential bang for their buck. This signal disparity was akin to two race cars having dramatically different horse power. Even if both drivers possessed equal skills, the one with the weaker car was unlikely to win a race. Marshall contended that if given an equally strong signal and six to nine months to build an audience, she could match the ratings for any conservative talker.

Especially given the disparity in signal strength, liberal radio needed substantial promotion to succeed, because listeners were unlikely to stumble upon liberal talk stations with their elevated dial positions. Even strong signaled stations needed substantial promotion to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>382</sup> Gabe Hobbs, E-mail Message to Author, March 18, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>383</sup> Jon Sinton, E-Mail Messages to Author, April 25, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>384</sup> Holland Cooke, Interview With Author; Tom Athans, Interview With Author; David Bernstein, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>385</sup> Leslie Marshall, Interview With Author, February 6, 2013.

prosper, especially when rolling out a new format. Further, drawing the potential audience for liberal talk back to AM political talk required catching their attention. Yet, promotion cost money, and corporate station owners understandably allocated promotional dollars and manpower for selling advertising within their cluster of stations in a city based upon which stations generated the most cash flow for the company. With liberal talk airing on weaker signaled stations that drew lower advertising rates, these stations seldom received sufficient promotion or large sales teams. In fact, often, owners threw in free advertising on a small signaled station in exchange for buying advertising on stronger signaled sister stations. They had no desire to cannibalize the audience for their most profitable stations. Nor could they justify investing the majority of their promotional dollars on a smaller station that produced lower advertising rates, especially one airing unproven programming.

Even the rare liberal station with an invested progressive owner suffered from similar maladies. Owner Janet Robert could not afford expensive billboard advertising for her Minneapolis station, even though it promised to provide the most help in building an audience. That left her struggling to use word of mouth, guerrilla marketing, and free media to draw attention to her station. Unfortunately, cross ownership made it difficult to get free publicity from television stations owned by her competitors, and she lacked the ability to offer advertisers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>386</sup> Air America generated much free publicity in the month surrounding its launch. However, at that time, Air America programming only aired on five stations, which limited how many listeners this publicity could drive to AM radio. Instead, it could only drive listeners to Air America's nascent website, which the network had not monetized in any way, and which was unprepared to handle the volume of listeners that it received.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>387</sup> *Talkers Magazine* explained that, "many in talk can offer horror stories of young account executives with a cluster offering to "bonus clients on the AM" if they buy a big schedule on the music FM." Kevin Casey, "So, how's Business? Talk Radio Sales Is a Financial Mixed Bag With Winners, Losers, and Lots of Players Somewhere In-Between," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 154 (December 2004/January 2005): 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>388</sup> This conflict of interests demonstrated one of the problems with consolidated station ownership. iHeartMedia acted not out of malice towards liberal talk, but rather to advance the bottom line. Nonetheless, the end result might have been weaker liberal talk stations that eventually failed, and thus, less variety for listeners.

package deals in the way that conglomerates with a cluster of stations in the market could.

Locally owned liberal stations also confronted other disadvantages in seeking advertisers, including conservative local advertising buyers.<sup>389</sup>

#### Air America: A Star Studded Train Wreck

The failure of Air America substantially, and perhaps irreparably, wounded the liberal talk format. Ironically, Air America's failure hurt liberal radio precisely because the network branded itself incredibly successfully. During its time on the air, Air America became synonymous with liberal radio, similar to the way in which Kleenex and tissues get used interchangeably. This connection was sufficiently strong that when Air America declared bankruptcy, Janet Robert struggled to spread word that her station remained alive and well. Thus, as Air America flailed and floundered, it became an indictment of the entire format. It reconfirmed for radio executives that liberal talk formats could not succeed commercially. Also because of the successful branding campaign and the attention that Air America received because of its celebrity hosts, liberals turned to the network to hear their frustrations aired, which might have soured them on the broader format when the programming did not meet expectations.

Air America had a promising start—massive free publicity,<sup>390</sup> sufficient interest from curious listeners to generate two millions clicks on the audio programming on Air America's website during its first week on the air, and a ripe potential audience of frustrated liberals.<sup>391</sup> Yet,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>389</sup> Robert, Interview With Author, ; Robert Unmacht, Interview With Author,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>390</sup> A Factiva search for "Air America," during the month before the network launched, and the week after launch, (March 1st, 2004 through April 7th, 2004) resulted in 371 hits. Although some of these articles and television transcripts were duplicates of syndicated columns or *Associated Press* stories, Air America's launch still generated substantial publicity, including coverage on the *Today Show*, *NBC Nightly News*, and in most of the country's major newspapers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>391</sup> Jacques Steinberg, "Despite Two Months on the Air, Liberal U.S. Talk-Radio Network Generates Static," *The International Herald Tribune*, June 1, 2004.

Air America squandered this promise because of the factors that plagued liberal radio writ large, but also because of eight weaknesses specific to the network: mismanagement, poor talent selection, a mismatch between the scope of the endeavor and the available funding, a poor business model, an ambitious, but flawed, attempt to reinvent the genre, its' unreliability, the fallout from a fraudulent investor, and the failure to successfully monetize Air America's website.

Air America struggled first and foremost because the lack of capital invested in the project rendered its ambitious business model unachievable. As former Air America CEO Danny Goldberg explained, its founders had a \$50 million vision and less than half that amount in funding.<sup>392</sup> Even initial Air America President Jon Sinton agreed that the network was undercapitalized. Starting a network required sustaining years of losses—Fox News Channel lost hundreds of millions of dollars in its initial years.<sup>393</sup> Even optimistic Air America CEO Mark Walsh noted before launch that the network expected to lose \$30 million in its first few years on the air.<sup>394</sup>

Unfortunately, Air America's founder, Evan Montvel-Cohen, misrepresented how much money he could produce for the project. As a result, within a few weeks of launching, investors had to dip into their own pockets to meet payroll and to restore employees' health insurance,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>392</sup> Goldberg, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>393</sup> Sinton estimated the number at \$300 million, whereas former Fox News Managing Editor and Anchor Brit Hume placed the number at close to a billion dollars; Goldberg, Interview With Author; Sinton, E-mail Messages to Author, April 25, 2012 & March 19, 2013; Joe Hagan, "Al Gore Would Rather Be Ailes Than President," *The New York Observer*, October 13, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>394</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Liberal Radio Network Hits Air With Left Jab; Programming Debuts With Al Franken," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2004.

which had been cut off. Air America also fell \$2 million behind in payments to creditors.<sup>395</sup> In fact, while Air America's executives believed that they had \$20-\$30 million in the bank on launch day, in actuality, the network was essentially insolvent. After approximately a month on the air, Air America's board forced Cohen and Vice Chairman Rex Sorensen to resign.<sup>396</sup>

This financial turmoil devastated Air America, because executives had a grandiose vision, which included both station ownership and a programming network.<sup>397</sup> The initial plan called for outright ownership of five stations at launch.<sup>398</sup> In fact, the network apparently launched with clandestine agreements in place to purchase five stations in large markets with sufficiently strong signals to cover entire listening areas. Walsh delayed consummating these deals so that the network could produce a full day of programming before completing the purchases to help with FCC approval of the sales. These agreements, however, depended upon investment from private equity firms, which dried up when Air America's finances disintegrated.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>395</sup> Walsh, Interview with Author; *Left of the Dial*; Julia Angwin and Sarah McBride, "Radio Daze--Inside Air American's Troubles: Optimism and Shaky Finances--In an Election Year, Talk Radio For Liberals Made Sense; A \$24 Million Shortfall--Al Franken's Kitchen Surprise," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>396</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author; Angwin and McBride, "Radio Daze--Inside Air American's Troubles;" Jacques Steinberg, "Liberal Voices (Some Sharp) Get New Home on Radio Dial," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>397</sup> Billy Kimball, Interview With Author; Paul Fiddick, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>398</sup> Steinberg, "Liberal Voices (Some Sharp) Get New Home on Radio Dial."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>399</sup> A dispute existed as to how close Air America actually came to purchasing stations. As CEO, Mark Walsh was best positioned to know the details of any quiet negotiations (outside of the disgraced Evan Montvel-Cohen) and he provided the information in the text. As the stations being pursued had formats and employees, the sellers might have desired keeping the negotiations below the radar. However, David Goodfriend, Air America's General Counsel, indicated that although the executive team explored the feasibility of purchasing stations, no agreement was ever close. Jon Sinton, Air America's President, agreed with Goodfriend, but noted that Walsh and Goodfriend would have the most accurate information pertaining to the potential acquisition of stations. Purchasing stations would have been difficult and expensive because a finite number of stations existed in major markets, and most had programming commitments and owners who were uninterested in selling. Typically, only unprofitable became available. In the era of corporate ownership, even an unprofitable station might be useful because of the economy of scale produced by having clusters of stations, or even because ownership of that station might block another company from using it to launch a competitor. Janet Robert only acquired her Minneapolis station because CBS was losing money; Mark Walsh, Interview With Author; David Goodfriend, Interview With Author; Jon Sinton, E-Mail Messages to Author, April 29, 2013; Janet Robert, Interview With Author.

Executives intended for the inherent value of and the revenue generated by the stations to support the overall business if the corporation's programming arm initially struggled to turn a profit. Without station ownership, Air America not only lacked this revenue but also had to lease stations in several cities, including New York. Even at great expense, this method only procured airtime on underperforming stations that held less allure for advertisers.

The animating assumptions behind Air America's vision necessitated this drastic step, because they inspired a rule requiring affiliates to carry the network's entire day of programming. Executives believed that liberal radio had struggled previously in part because liberal shows were sandwiched between conservative shows. They also worried that without this requirement, many stations would carry one or two Air America programs, but few would take the entire broadcast day. Air America would have to share revenue with these stations (which would acquire the programs through the barter method), and the overall operation would risk producing one-sixth as much revenue if outlets only added one Air America show. While ensuring that all of the network's programs had equal clearance, this rule necessitated leasing stations because most potential affiliates had unbreakable contracts to air other content, and some stations wished to tailor their brand to local needs.

When Air America launched in 2004, Janet Robert was preparing to launch a progressive station.<sup>403</sup> She valued having at least one local program, and she wanted to carry the newly syndicated Ed Schultz Show (which Democracy Radio launched in 2004), making it impossible

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>400</sup> Mark Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>401</sup> Goodfriend, Interview With Author; Sinton, E-Mail Messages to Author, March 19, 2013; Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>402</sup> David Bernstein, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>403</sup> At the time, Robert leased 7 hours per day on another station. She was preparing to launch an all day progressive stations.

to air Air America's entire broadcasting day. Yet, Robert wanted to carry Franken's show. Only on the eve of launch, after weeks of negotiations, did Air America's executives acquiesce to Robert airing Franken's show without carrying the rest of the network's programs, because they wanted Franken on the air in his home market on day one.<sup>404</sup>

This policy kept Air America's programming off the air in places. Rick Cummings of Emmis Communications, a major station owner, decided against carrying Air America programming because he did not want to dedicate entire stations to it. 405 Station owner Michael Zwerling even wrote a letter to *Talkers Magazine* entitled "Franken Should Dump Air America," after Jon Sinton refused to allow Zwerling to broadcast Franken's show, initially because Zwerling refused to pick up Air America's entire broadcast day, and subsequently, because his station aired Michael Savage's conservative show. Sinton's refusal left Franken off the air in Zwerling's market. 406 Within a year, Air America executives amended this policy so that stations could affiliate with the network if they broadcast two of its three dayparts between 6 AM and 7 PM. 407 In 2007, when David Bernstein became Vice President of Programming, he eliminated the rule altogether. 408

The general mismatch between the Air America concept and the reality of the radio business owed in part to Air America's top executives having minimal experience in network radio. Even Jon Sinton, one of the few executives with substantial radio experience, had never

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>404</sup> Robert, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>405</sup> Angwin and McBride, ""Radio Daze--Inside Air American's Troubles."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>406</sup> Sinton claimed that an Air America affiliate existed in the same listening radius, but when Zwerling checked this station, he found music being broadcast; Michael Zwerling, "Franken Should Dump Air America," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 149 (June 2004): 20; Jon Sinton, E-Mail Message to Author, August 14, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>407</sup> Abbey Klassen, "Air America Radio Tunes In to Its Third CEO; Liberal Net Has Spent \$20 Million So Far," *Advertising Age*, February 21, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>408</sup> Bernstein, Interview With Author.

served as in network radio management.<sup>409</sup> The result, as Rick Cummings concluded, was that Air America's executives, "quickly realized there were a lot of things they didn't know, and one was how to do radio."<sup>410</sup>

Air America's vision for content matched the network's ambitious business model. The network's executives tried to create a new type of talk radio, partly because they disliked traditional talk formats. Walsh did not want to replicate the world of "dittoheads" and "bile spewing." Sinton wanted Air America's programs to include more entertainment and information, and far less of the usual host caller dynamic. Additionally, he recognized that liberals excelled at storytelling in the motion picture, music, and television industries. He aimed to take advantage of these strengths in programming Air America. Walsh described their ideal programming as lighter than the normal talk radio fare, "somewhere between NPR and Saturday Night Live." This vision led to Air America hiring eleven comedy writers to produce content for the network's shows. The best bits would air repeatedly throughout the day like hit songs on a music station.<sup>411</sup>

Although sensible to build from strength, this vision fit far better with the scripted world of television than the freewheeling world of talk radio, and substantially increased costs. Most talk radio hosts produced fifteen hours of unique content each week with a staff of a few,<sup>412</sup> whereas a program like the *Daily Show* employed a team of writers to produce two hours weekly.<sup>413</sup> As hosts joined Air America, the network progressed towards this traditional model.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>409</sup> Sinton, E-Mail Message to Author, April 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>410</sup> Angwin and McBride, ""Radio Daze--Inside Air American's Troubles."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>411</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author; Billy Kimball, Interview With Author; Sinton, E-mail Messages to Author, March 19, 2013 & April 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>412</sup> Typically, talk radio shows employed, at most a host, a producer, a call screener, and sometimes a researcher (all of which Air America's shows still required).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>413</sup> David Hall, Interview With Author.

The increased cost of Air America's reimagined talk format hurt the undercapitalized network, which could have used the money to gain clearance on more stations.

Air America executives also eschewed the traditional single host format, instead pairing hosts together into sometimes awkward duos and trios. Sinton attempted to hire smart entertainers, with either high name recognition, or an ability to blend insight and humor. He then paired these radio neophytes with someone who had some radio experience. United Lizz Winstead, the *Daily Show* co-creator who oversaw Air America's creative side, wanted each show to have a cohost because she wanted, "no monologues. We feel like everyone should be kept in check all the time. United Air America attempted to replicate the generic format of the typically apolitical and stunt heavy "Morning Zoo" programs, which prospered in FM morning drive.

These shows featured a host, who could be aggressive and sometimes abrasive, paired with a more light-hearted sidekick, and a female cohost. United As such, Winstead, the then unknown Rachel Maddow, and rapper Chuck D initially formed a trio, and radio veteran Marc Riley teamed with comedian Marc Maron, and former BBC correspondent Sue Ellicot to host "Morning Sedition."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>414</sup> Sinton, E-mail Messages to Author, April 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>415</sup> Rachel Donadio, "Lefty Radioheads Bite Back," New York Observer, January 12, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>416</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author.

Most political talk radio shows, however, featured an individual host. <sup>417</sup> Further, the few successful talk radio partnerships, such as Sacramento's Jack Armstrong and Joe Getty, or Los Angeles' John Kobylt and Ken Chiampou, involved partners who spent decades together on the air honing their act. By contrast, the Air America teams debuted on a national stage without having worked together previously. Sam Seder estimated that he and partner Janeane Garrafolo, neither of whom had radio experience, had no more than two full rehearsal shows because mistakes marred their rehearsals. <sup>418</sup> The documentary *Left of the Dial* depicted these pairs and trios struggling to mesh during rehearsals in the month before launch. Pairing hosts represented yet another risk that reduced Air America's chances to thrive. None of these risks individually spelled doom, but cumulatively, they made success unlikely.

Radio insiders uninvolved with Air America argued that the lack of prior radio experience possessed by Air America's hosts played a central role in the network's failure. Air America insiders disagreed, claiming that they created something new, which required recruiting people from the outside. Further, they believed that the people hired fit their programming vision well. Danny Goldberg cited Al Franken's successful ratings, the revenue he produced, and Rachel Maddow's subsequent media stardom to bolster this claim. He argued that both produced

<sup>417</sup> Both *Talkers Magazine*'s 2013 and 2014 Heavy Hundred lists of the top 100 talk radio hosts, which covered far more than political talk, featured 87 individual hosts, and 13 duos or ensembles. Of those thirteen, however, only three were in the top 50 in 2013 and four in 2014; Similarly, the 2006 Heavy Hundred list (which ranked 100 hosts and then listed another 150 significant hosts in alphabetical order) demonstrated how pairings were far more common in "hot talk" formats, such as Morning Zoo or guy talk programs, than they were in political talk. Only 17 of the 166 news/talk programs on the list featured cohosts. By contrast, nine of the twenty-one hot talk programs featured multiple hosts or ensemble casts. See 2006 Heavy Hundred, *Talkers Magazine*, no. 165 (February 2006): 14-16-25-27-28-29-30-31. *Talkers Magazine* updates the list on its website each year (see <a href="https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/">https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/</a>), but the 2013 and 2014 lists can be accessed using the Internet Archive WaybackMachine; "Internet Archive WaybackMachine," "thtps://archive.org/web/; "2014 Talkers Heavy Hundred," *Talkers Magazine*, <a href="https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/">https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/</a>; "2013 Heavy Hundred," *Talkers Magazine*, <a href="https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/">https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/</a>; "2013 Heavy Hundred," *Talkers Magazine*, <a href="https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/">https://www.talkers.com/heavy-hundred/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>418</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>419</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author; Goldberg, Interview With Author; Seder, Interview With Author; Sinton, Email-Message to Author, March 19, 2013.

better programs than some more experienced liberal talkers, and noted that show business of any sort produced high failure rates. 420 Sam Seder also contended that their inexperience gave Air America's hosts the freedom to do unique and unprecedented things. 421

Franken and Maddow certainly adhered to Air America executives' vision, doing more scripted programs and taking no phone calls. 422 Yet, these "innovations" reduced the intimacy and spontaneity upon which talk radio thrived. Additionally, Seder and Garrafolo did an interview heavy, magazine style show that jumped from topic to topic, and sometimes even included live music. 423 On balance, the selection of inexperienced hosts hurt Air America. 424

Air America's only veteran host, Randi Rhodes (also the only host with her own show), produced a high quality product from the network's inception because her experience allowed her to hit the ground running. By contrast, many of Air America's other shows struggled initially as the hosts learned the craft of radio on the air. Billy Kimball described Air America's early programs as "unfocused," and Sam Seder likened them to college radio. Among the inexperienced hosts, Franken most benefitted Air America because his presence generated substantial free media attention that offset the lack of funds for paid promotions. Thus, a lineup that included Franken and one other non-radio person, along with a core of locally successful

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>420</sup> Observers differed on the quality of Franken's program. Most agree that it began poorly and improved with time, though probably without ever being better than average or decent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>421</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>422</sup> Franken took calls for the first few weeks and then stopped because most people had little to say beyond that it was great that he was doing a radio program. Kimball, Interview With Author; Peter Ogburn, Interview With Author; Bernstein, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>423</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>424</sup> These choices also ignored the history of talk radio, which as Thom Hartmann noted, included many no names turned stars, and very few successful hosts who achieved celebrity for other endeavors; Hartmann, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>425</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author; Seder, Interview With Author.

radio veterans, such as Leslie Marshall or Mike Malloy,<sup>426</sup> would have been far better positioned to take advantage of the curiosity seekers who flocked to Air America because of prelaunch publicity. Alternatively, Air America's neophyte hosts needed far more rehearsal time to develop their programs.

Celebrity hosts motivated programmers to try Air America because of their ability to draw listeners. Yet, when their programs proved to be of lesser quality, listeners and executives moved on. For example, in September 2004, Tom Athans struggled to launch the Stephanie Miller Show as the second program from Democracy Radio because Air America launched Jerry Springer's show at the same time. Many owners and programmers had more confidence that the celebrity Springer could draw an audience than the unknown Miller. Yet, over the course of a year, Miller's talent shined through, and her audience and affiliate numbers grew, while Springer struggled to build and maintain an audience.<sup>427</sup>

Mark Walsh believed that such a hunger existed for non-NPR radio that was intelligent, funny, progressive, and politically incorrect that listeners would stay with Air America even if inexperienced hosts initially faltered. He anticipated fixing early bugs without losing the audience. Yet, the difference between Rhodes' initial success and Marc Maron's difficulties illustrated why Air America would have improved its chances to thrive by adding a few more experienced hosts to its lineup.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>426</sup> Strikingly, in interviews, some Air Americas executives seemed to be unaware that veteran liberal hosts broadcast shows at that time. This lack of awareness demonstrated how difficult it was for an executive group coming primarily from outside of radio to successfully build a radio network. David Goodfriend, Interview With Author; Jon Sinton, E-mail Messages to Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>427</sup> Tom Athans, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>428</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author.

Maron, currently the host of a successful podcast, 429 developed a style of political comedy that Air America Vice President of Programming Shelley Lewis believed had the potential to flourish for many years. By the end of his time at Air America, Maron felt like he had created some amazing political comedy. Yet, Maron struggled initially to learn about politics, policy, and radio, and to develop a workable radio style. A lack of chemistry and uncertainly as to who drove their show also plagued *Morning Sedition*. When Ellicot left after two months, Maron and Riley developed better chemistry. Over time Maron hit his stride, but the program that inspired Lewis' confidence differed significantly from the initial morning show. 430

Eventually, in December 2005, over Lewis' objections, Air America cancelled *Morning Sedition* because of low ratings. Even an audience hungry for Air America's brand of talk did not have unlimited patience. Also, because of its financial situation, Air America's executives could not afford years of patience while hosts developed the ability to hold an audience. 431

Off air, Air America's management made equally suspect decisions. Sam Seder nicely summarized Air America's spendthrift ways, arguing that the network's greatest success came during its' 2006 bankruptcy, which necessitated dramatically reducing costs and minimizing management interference. Air America host and investor Mike Papantonio estimated that the operation could have been run on one-twentieth of the funds through which Air America burned. Air America host and investor Mike Papantonio estimated that the operation could have been run on one-twentieth of the funds through which Air America burned. Air America host all of Air America's talent under one roof exemplified the network's profligacy. Billy Kimball correctly observed that shows could have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>429</sup> See Marc Maron, "WTF with Marc Maron," http://www.wtfpod.com (accessed June 9, 2015).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>430</sup> Maron, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>431</sup>For perspective, in spite of years of experience and massive talent, it took Rush Limbaugh two years to build an audience in some cities. Air America, unlike a more established network, did not have the financial wherewithal to extend this sort of patience to developing hosts; Lewis, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>432</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>433</sup> Mike Papantonio, Interview With Author, June 11, 2013.

originated remotely, and the funds expended on the studio could have been reallocated towards getting the network on the air in more places. And More broadly, Papantonio charged that Air America should simply have served as a common syndicator, promoter, and affiliate relations manager. Yet, applying lessons from his previous business ventures, Walsh wanted all of his hosts in one location. Otherwise, he feared that the process of building a massive business incredibly quickly would magnify small mistakes, which would be harder to correct, and make replicating successful elements more difficult. However true this general assessment, the new studio represented money that could have been better spent.

Furthermore, Air America struggled with a bloated payroll and a meddlesome board. As Walsh noticed from afar after departing, 437 Air America raised substantial funds after its initial tumult, but its' cost structure also skyrocketed due to an expanding payroll. 438 In retrospect, both Walsh and Goodfriend believed that the company hired far too many writers. 439 Moreover, Air America had a multitude of overlapping executives with unnecessarily large salaries. 440 Their celebrity also dictated that Air America's stars would earn hefty salaries for unproven radio talents. Franken made a million dollars in the first year of his program and two million dollars in the second year. His hand-selected producer, Kimball, earned \$500,000 per year, more than all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>434</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>435</sup> Such a role would be similar to that which Democracy Radio filled in conjunction with Jones Media for programs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>436</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author; Span, "Radio Waves; Talk-show Host Randi Rhodes Joined a New Liberal Network."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>437</sup> Walsh later became reinvolved in Air America as an investor.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>438</sup> Mark Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>439</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author; Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>440</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author.

but the very best radio hosts made.<sup>441</sup> As the network's star and public face, Franken's presence was integral to several deals, including one with Sirius/XM that produced a large portion of the network's revenue.<sup>442</sup> Nonetheless, these salaries limited Air America's spending in other areas.

Air America's executives never found a business model that produced sufficient revenue to support this expensive cost structure. They failed to adequately monetize initially strong ratings<sup>443</sup> and robust web interest. The instability plaguing the network and the ineptitude of its sales staff hurt Air America with traditional advertisers. The network's controversial and liberal programming, and the protests from conservative watch dogs over this content, also reduced interest from advertisers. Have Air America with traditional mused, why would Pfizer, Merck, or Exxon advertise on his show when he devoted his air time to excoriating them? Air America's sales team also generated insufficient advertising from liberal organizations, who needed to reach Air America's listeners, to offset the struggles with traditional advertisers.

Air America's website offered another potential source of revenue. In fact, Mark Walsh actually viewed Air America as an internet project with a radio component, rather than the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>441</sup> Tom Athans, Interview With Author; Mike Papantonio believed that the network paid Franken somewhere in the range of \$3 million over his time at Air America, which would equate to a salary slightly lower than Athans estimated.

<sup>442</sup> Kimball, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>443</sup> Air America generated fairly strong ratings in certain markets and with certain demographic groups. Especially in the first year, these ratings were also quite strong for a new network. Over time, however, they stagnated and declined; John Mainelli, Mainelli's Take: Shame on You George Noory and Art Bell, *Talkers Magazine*, Issue 159, June 2005, 33; John Mainelli, "Mainelli's Take: The Fogey Doctrine," *Talkers Magazine*, Issue 160, July/August 2005, 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>444</sup> Janet Robert provided copies of several of no buy lists dated February 8, 2006, May 22, 2006, June 12, 2006, June 19, 2006, and August 26, 2009. All included a list of blue chip companies whose advertising could not air on Air America or other controversial talk programming. Yet, as some of these companies advertised on conservative radio, the liberal nature of Air America's content, not merely its controversial nature, likely turned them off. See Maria Aspan, "Some Advertisers Shun Air America, A Lonely Voice From Talk Radio's Left," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>445</sup> Mike Papantonio, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>446</sup> Seder, Interview With Author.

reverse.<sup>447</sup> Walsh regretted not investing substantially more time and money on the web side of business in order to ensure that shows were streaming and archived from day one. He believed that a beefed up website with a subscription model would have thrived because so many listeners wanted to donate to the operation. Sam Seder went further, contending that Air America floundered primarily because management failed to see the potential to monetize the internet side of the venture.<sup>448</sup>Seder noted that at the time of Franken's 2006 departure from Air America, he, Rhodes, and the morning show all had impressive numbers of unique streams per five minutes. Yet, internet streaming remained nascent during Air America's early years, and its' executives (subsequent to Walsh) saw their operation as primarily a radio endeavor.<sup>449</sup> They did not understand the potential value of podcasting or subscription services. When Thom Hartmann joined Air America, the network sacrificed significant revenue simply by failing to send a cease and desist letter to a man with whom Hartmann had previously contracted to sell podcasts of his show.<sup>450</sup> The failure to adopt a subscription model illuminated Air America's broader failure to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>447</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>448</sup> Shelley Lewis confirmed that Seder understood the potential of the internet and encouraged his bosses to invest more heavily in Air America's web footprint to no avail; Mike Papantonio agreed that a web-based model might have been more successful, and pointed to other liberal media ventures, such as *The Huffington Post*, that thrived because they took advantage of internet's potential; Mike Papantonio, Interview With Author.

<sup>449</sup> Although, starting a robust web and podcasting operation in 2004 would have been ahead of its time, by 2005, *Talkers Magazine* ran a number of articles on podcasting and news items on major talk radio talent beefing up their web presences. Thus, *Air America* could have built a major web footprint relatively early in the company's existence without its' executives being visionaries about the future of the internet and content delivery. See, for example, Jayne Pearl, "Everything You Wanted to Know About Podcasting But Were Afraid To Ask," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 159 (June 2005): 6, 8, & 12; Kevin Casey, "New Media Seminar VIII Tackles Key Issues, *Talkers Magazine*, no. 160 (July/August 2005): 1-17; Mike Evans, "Make Internet Radio and Podcasting Part of Your Arsenal," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 161 (September 2005): 38, 39, & 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>450</sup> Seder, Interview With Author.

harness their fan base's willingness to support the network through any number of potential funding models.<sup>451</sup>

Many of Air America's problems derived from a flawed and conflicted mission. For many involved, the network constituted a political cause, not merely a business. They wanted to combat the political advantage provided by conservative talk radio and to advance a liberal agenda. Programmer Randal Bloomquist labeled the effort, "an attempt at reverse engineering," because it began as much with Democratic politicians and financiers with political goals as with businessmen trying to profit. Mark Walsh estimated that, "Probably two-thirds of the dollars came from investors who wanted to help the cause and had crossed fingers that this also proved a viable, sustainable, profitable business... One-third were investors who saw this as a viable, sustainable, profitable business and had crossed fingers that it would be politically effective." Even Walsh, who intended to build a successful, sustainable media platform, also wanted to get Air America on the air before the 2004 election because of concern about President Bush's policies.

Shelley Lewis believed that liberals generally saw talk radio as a social mission, whereas conservatives saw it as a financial mission, and Air America attempted to square the circle and have it both ways.<sup>455</sup> Unfortunately, the two goals were fundamentally incompatible. A thriving radio business required prioritizing developing programming that could best attract

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>451</sup> Lewis, Interview With Author; Susan Brenna, "They Look Nothing Like Rush Limbaugh," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2005; Bill O'Reilly, "Air America Hurting Financially," *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News, October 7, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>452</sup> Air America's investors wanted to make money. However, they also had a major political agenda that was as important as, if not more important than, business success. Walsh, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>453</sup> Span, "Radio Waves; Talk-show Host Randi Rhodes Joined a New Liberal Network."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>454</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>455</sup> Shelley Lewis, Interview With Author, May 17, 2013.

advertisers.<sup>456</sup> Trying to achieve commercial and political goals led to a confused product; many of the poor on air pairings derived from the desire to provide news and entertainment by pairing a news or radio person with an entertainer.<sup>457</sup>

The speed with which the network launched exemplified the inherent conflict between Air America's political and business goals. Many Air America personnel wanted to defeat President Bush, which necessitated launching during the 2004 election cycle. Yet, achieving this goal required launching with substandard technical facilities. On launch day, AirAmerica.com was simply a unclickable picture of a microphone. Subsequently, the overwhelmed internet stream kept crashing. The broadcasting equipment also functioned haphazardly— in one case Rhodes tried to cut a caller off, only to find out that she could not. He rushed launch also meant insufficient time for hosts to rehearse and develop programs. Thus, its' political goal required launching Air America before the network could put forth a product that could succeed with listeners, and thus with advertisers, which, from a business perspective, should have been the goal.

Launch problems segued into turmoil that plagued Air America throughout its existence.

Walsh quit after only two days on the air because of conflicts with Montvel-Cohen and

Sorensen. 461 Two weeks later, Air America lost its Chicago and Los Angeles affiliates due to a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>456</sup>Gabe Hobbs, Interview With Author; Paul Fiddick, Interview with Author; Holland Cooke, Interview with Author; Gary Burns, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>457</sup> Lewis, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>458</sup> Evan Montvel-Cohen applied pressure to launch early, because unbeknownst to others in the management, he needed the revenue from ad sales to keep the company afloat; Walsh, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>459</sup> Sam Seder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>460</sup> "Left of the Dial," directed by Patrick Farrelly and Kate O'Callaghan; Span, "Radio Waves; Talk-show Host Randi Rhodes Joined a New Liberal Network."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>461</sup> Mike Tierney, "Plenty to Talk About Liberal Air America Is Alive and Well, To The Surprise of Naysayers, Founder," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, December 8, 2004.

contract dispute. By Air America's two month birthday, five of the network's top executives had quit or been forced out. 462 These problems produced substantial bad press. Subsequently, in 2005, Winstead sued the network for unpaid wages after being fired. 463 Additionally, the news broke that Montvel-Cohen, who had also been the development director for a New York Boys and Girls Club, had appropriated \$875,000 of the club's funds for Air America. 464 Although Montvel-Cohen had long since left Air America, the publicity from the scandal exacerbated the network's problems and necessitated repayment.

In October 2006, Air America declared bankruptcy after losing almost \$42 million in a little over two and a half years, and having liabilities of \$20 million and only \$4 million in assets. 465 By that point, only two of the five original Air America programs 466 remained on the air, and Franken was in the process of leaving. Air America had also been forced onto a weaker signaled station in New York, and its programming did not air in three of the top ten radio markets and only reached fifty-eight percent of the country. 467

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>462</sup>Steinberg, "Despite Two Months on the Air, Liberal U.S. Talk-Radio Network Generates Static."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>463</sup> Dareh Gregorian, "Lefty Radio Waved Bye to 'Cheated' Host (M)- Axed Radio Host Sues Lefty Station (S, LCF), *The New York Post*, May 24, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>464</sup> Sewell Chan, "Bronx Charity to Repay City \$625,000 Given to Radio Network as a Loan," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2006; David Lombino, "Network's Former Chairman is Missing," *The New York Sun*, August 26, 2005; David B. Caruso, "Investigators Probe Community Center Loan to Air America Radio," *The Associated Press*, August 12, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>465</sup>Air America sustained significantly smaller initial losses than Fox News. In fact, Fox's ability to sustain itself in the face of such losses provided further evidence that the mismatch between its founders' expansive vision and limited startup capital crippled Air America. Additionally, these losses did not dramatically exceed the \$30 million that Walsh had expected to lose in the first few years on the air. Had the network's cash reserves been what they should have been, bankruptcy would have been avoided; Lizzy Ratner, "Green Brothers Win! Steve, Mark to Buy Leaky Air America," *The New York Observer, February 19, 2007*;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>466</sup> The five main weekday programs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>467</sup> David Hinckley, Air America No Longer A 'Lib-eral Network," *The New York Daily News*, August 31, 2006; David Hinckley, "WLIB to Launch Gospel Format," *The New York Daily News*," August 21, 2006; John Eggerton, "Air America Files for Bankruptcy," *Broadcasting and Cable*," October 13, 2006; Paul Fahri, "Air America Files For Bankruptcy; Liberal Talk Radio Network Vows to Go On, *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2006; Elizabeth Jensen and Lia Miller, "After Bankruptcy Filing, Recriminations Fly at Air America," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2006.

The constant executive turnover (Air America averaged almost an owner and a CEO per year of existence), affiliate switches, bad publicity, and inadequate broadcasting transmission exhausted affiliates and listeners alike. A promising start disintegrated as Air America became known for financial instability, scandal, and constant change. Affiliate programmers could not count on Air America to provide programming long term, and listeners could not find Air America on the dial. When they did find the network, it offered erratic programming. All of this turmoil scared off potential investors who might have helped to stabilize the network's finances.

Overall, Montvel-Cohen's deceptions devastated Air America. They prevented the purchase of stations, and thereby destroyed the original business model for the project.

Additionally, they prevented Air America from more aggressively fundraising before launch, because Walsh believed that money was in the bank that did not exist. Montvel-Cohen's deceptions also made it more difficult to recruit investors in the months after his departure because no one knew what further liabilities Air America might incur because of his perfidy. Finally, the Boys and Girls Club scandal led to bad publicity in 2005 and cost the network money.

Nonetheless, Air America's failure also stemmed from its ambitious and risky vision and poor management. Even as Air America received millions in investments in the years following Montvel-Cohen's departure, it struggled financially. Building the kind of network envisioned by Air America's founders required incurring three to five years of losses.<sup>470</sup> That required

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>468</sup> Jensen and Miller, "After Bankruptcy Filing, Recriminations Fly."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>469</sup> Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>470</sup> Air America survived its 2006 bankruptcy, but the resultant negative publicity made Air America appear to be a poor investment, scared away potential affiliates, and led some potential listeners to believe that the network no longer existed. These repercussions damaged its long term chances for survival.

substantial capital, as operating expenses were a minimum of \$12 million per year as of 2005.<sup>471</sup> Additionally, the money invested in Air America was often poorly spent on a bloated payroll and an unnecessarily expensive concept. The multitude of executives and actively involved investors also led to conflicts and made it difficult to steer the company in a consistent direction.

Furthermore, the combination of inexperienced talent and minimal rehearsal time resulted in rough programming on day one, when millions of curious listeners sampled Air America. Finally, puzzlingly, executives who pushed for a creative programming model and an ambitious business venture lacked the vision to monetize their internet operation and/or to adopt an alternative funding model to offset the difficulty of recruiting traditional advertisers. This lack of vision sealed Air America's fate.

#### **Politics Meets Radio**

A politically driven cabal did not produce the ideological imbalance in talk radio. Yet, conservative groups nurtured conservative talk after the format developed. By contrast, progressive interests failed to similarly support liberal radio, contributing to the format's struggles. This disparity also illuminated the complex interaction between ideological interests and talk radio.

Powerful Republicans played no role in constructing the conservative dominance of talk radio that benefitted their party.<sup>472</sup> Rather, business decisions created and perpetuated this imbalance. Even the legal changes engineered by conservatives, such as the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and the enactment of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, that contributed to this development derived from a philosophical commitment to deregulation, not any perceived

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>471</sup> Klassen, "Air America Radio Tunes In To Its Third CEO."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>472</sup> See chapter one for a fuller explanation of why talk radio became increasingly conservative during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

potential political benefits.<sup>473</sup>Subsequently, however, after ideologically aligned talk radio developed, conservatives supported the medium, thereby improving its chances for success. For example, beginning in the 1990s, the conservative Heritage Foundation aggressively cultivated the medium by providing radio actualities and live guests to discuss hot topics. During the 1990s, Heritage installed ISDN lines to make it easier for its experts to participate in talk radio, and the foundation eventually built state of the art radio studios on premises. Hosts often broadcasted from Heritage when visiting Washington. Heritage also sent hosts a daily hot sheet with talking points and suggested guests to discuss these issues.<sup>474</sup>

Additionally, beginning in 2008, Heritage purchased \$2.5 million in advertising time on talk radio to promote the foundation. Its first campaign, entitled What Would Reagan Do, involved hosts asking what President Reagan would do about an issue. The following year, Heritage launched the similarly sized Ask Heritage campaign involving hosts Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Heritage wanted to broaden its support and grow its membership, but the multimillion dollar ad buys also supported the friendly medium. Other conservative groups also promoted themselves on talk radio. Beginning early in Limbaugh's reign as king of talk radio, his television and radio advertisers included the Conservative Chronicle, the American Spectator, the National Rifle Association, the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, Republican candidates,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>473</sup> The 1996 Telecommunications Act, while broadly deregulatory, had substantial bipartisan support and was signed into law by President Clinton. Democrats, including Clinton, would not have acquiesced to the radio deregulation provisions of this bill if they had believed that these provisions would have had a detrimental political effect. See Bryan Gruley and Albert R. Karr, "Telecommunications: Telecom Vote Signals Competitive Free-for-All —Bill's Passage Represents Will Of Both Parties," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 1996, B1; "It's a New World. This Is Not 1930. Wake Up. (Congressman Jack Fields' Telecommunications Reform Bill)," *Broadcasting and Cable*, June 26, 1995, 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>474</sup> Khristine Brookes, Interview With Author, November 9, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>475</sup> Brookes, Interview With Author, November 9, 2012; Brookes, E-mail Message to Author, April 12, 2013; Genevieve Wood, E-Mail Message to Author, April 23, 2013; Lee Edwards, *Leading the Way: The Story of Ed Feulner and the Heritage Foundation* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013), 312-313.

and others with conservative messages.<sup>476</sup> For conservatives, advertising on Limbaugh's program promised a win-win. They reached their target demographic, and they supported a media platform that disseminated their ideas. As the internet burgeoned, other conservative businesses, including Hillsdale College, entered into special advertising relationships with hosts, such as Mark Levin, that involved passthrough links on the host's website to the conservative outlet.<sup>477</sup> Additionally, *Fox News* built a synergistic relationship with talk radio. In its infancy, Fox paid Limbaugh to read advertisements touting the station's fairness and arguing that unlike other news networks, Fox would provide more than "just the liberal slant or the reporter's own bias."<sup>478</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>476</sup> In a 1995 interview, Limbaugh actually explained that his team routinely rejected political advertising because he did not want other advertisers to view his show as being a "political environment," nor did he want his listeners solicited for donations. Alicia C. Shepard, "Spectator's Sport," *American Journalism Review*, May 1, 1995; Alan Pergament, "Get Mrs. Quayle Out of Promo; Rush Fans Should Stick to Radio," *The Buffalo News*, September 24, 1992; John M. McGuire, "O'Rourke Skewers D.C. Whiners," *The St Louis Post Dispatch*," June 29, 1992; Larry Peterson, "Campaign Budget Limits Dannemeyer to Radio Ads," *The Orange County Register*, May 1, 1992; Alan Pergament, "Whoopi Takes On Leno In Fall; UB Soap Experts Want 'Life,' April 17, 1992; Ron Hartenbaum E-Mail Message to Author, May 6, 2013; Doug Willis, "Six Percentage Points for \$3 Million is a Good Deal For Issa," *The Associated Press Newswires*, November 17, 1997; Christi Harlan, Rep Paul Replenishing Empty Purse//Surfside Republican- Garners \$161,000 Through June to Fill Depleted Coffers, *The Austin American Statesman*, August 9, 1997; Richard Powleson, "Group Pushing for TVA Sale; Coalition, Private Power Firms Trying to Convince Congress," *The Knoxville Sentinel News-Sentinel*, August 4, 1997; "Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series, The First Annual Radio Festival: Rush Limbaugh and the Talk Radio Revolution," October 24, 1995, Catalog number T:40932, accessed at the Paley Center's New York branch.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>477</sup> See <a href="http://www.marklevinshow.com">http://www.marklevinshow.com</a>, which, as of June 1, 2015, included a pass-through link on the right side of the screen for Hillsdale College.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>478</sup> Jamieson, and Cappella discussed this synergy in terms of message. I mean it more in a financial sense; The Missouri History Museum kindly reproduced audio recordings from the Richard Gephardt collection for me. One of these recordings consisted of the July 23rd, 1997 Rush Limbaugh program, which included an ad voiced by Limbaugh for Fox News. The text of the ad is as follows: "It's finally here: television news for the independent thinker. If you don't believe it, just watch the Fox News Channel. Its a new 24 hour national and international news network that is an alternative to the other news networks. The Fox News Channel is a separate cable channel, not your local Fox TV station. FNC is often first in breaking stories. But more importantly, the Fox News Channel insists upon fair and balanced news. It's not just one side of the story, not just the liberal slant or the reporter's own bias. Fox News is fair news. The Fox News Channel is receiving thousands of letters and email messages every day from viewers who are thrilled to finally have a fair and balanced alternative to the other news networks. Check it out on your local cable system or Direct TV on satellite. Ask for the Fox News Channel. Do it right now. Tell them you want fair news. Tell them you want Fox News. Let them know what you decide. Watch and then e-mail them at comments@foxnews.com. Remember Fox News is fair news. Yeah."

Subsequently, many leading talk radio hosts benefitted from appearances and hosting duties on Fox News that brought them to the attention of potential listeners.

Conservative websites also provided cross-promotional opportunities for talk radio hosts. Many leading hosts penned columns for Townhall.com, which the Heritage Foundation initially owned (today Salem Communications owns Townhall, as well as a large network of conservative talk radio stations). Similarly, Mike Gallagher wrote a column for Newsmax.com, and his November 10, 2000 show demonstrated the potential for cross-promotion. During the show, Gallagher mentioned several times that he wrote for Newsmax, and then interviewed Newsmax's founder because Newsmax was at the epicenter of the presidential election recount controversy in Palm Beach, Florida.<sup>479</sup> In some cases, hosts received compensation for writing these columns, but the columns mainly offered the potential to draw listeners to a host's program.<sup>480</sup>

By contrast, Democrats and left leaning groups did not provide the same level of support for liberal radio. The Center for American Progress (CAP) provided the most substantial aid. CAP opened a radio studio in 2005, and Bill Press broadcast from the center for a year. CAP also aggressively pitched its studies and scholars to talk radio of all ideological stripes. If someone called CAP looking for a guest, they received a recommendation, even if that meant recommending someone unaffiliated with the Center. Unlike Heritage, however, CAP did not disseminate a daily issue digest to producers and hosts. Even more significantly, CAP also bought no advertising, and thus provided no financial support for liberal radio.<sup>481</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>479</sup> Mike Gallagher, *The Mike Gallagher Show*, November 10, 2000, <a href="http://c-spanvideo.org/program/">http://c-spanvideo.org/program/</a> ElectionReactio.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>480</sup> Contrary to the belief of some on the left, the evidence indicated that hosts received at most nominal op-ed fees for writing these columns. See Douglas Wilson, E-Mail Message to Author, May 30, 2013; Hugh Hewitt, E-Mail Message to Author, May 20, 2013; Genevieve Wood, E-Mail Message to Author, May 20, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>481</sup> Andrea Purse, Interview With Author, May 9, 2013.

Beyond CAP, support for liberal radio from ideologically aligned groups dropped off quickly.<sup>482</sup> When David Goodfriend approached the leader of a prominent liberal group to ask for help in finding investors for Air America, the leader questioned why he should help Goodfriend when he needed to raise funds for his own group. This lack of "team spirit" among liberals left Goodfriend deeply disillusioned.<sup>483</sup> Similarly, Janet Robert found that among liberal potential investors and advertisers, only Minnesota's labor unions and tribal councils willingly purchased advertising on her station.<sup>484</sup> Disinterest from liberal groups contributed to Air America repeatedly airing public service announcements in lieu of paid advertising during its initial weeks on air.<sup>485</sup> Eric Burns and Mike Papantonio diagnosed this lack of support for liberal radio as being symptomatic of the fractured and factionalized nature of the left. Groups focused on their own narrow policy goals and lost sight of the bigger picture and the greater good.<sup>486</sup>

When entrepreneurs sought to build national liberal talk radio in the early 2000s, they needed buy in and assistance from top Democrats, liberal interest groups, and Democratic benefactors to overcome the built in disadvantages discussed in this chapter. They did not receive it. Democratic leaders, especially the Senate Democratic leadership, including, Tom Daschle (SD), Harry Reid (NV), Byron Dorgan (ND), and Debbie Stabenow (MI), convened meetings (including with hosts) in an attempt to ascertain why liberal radio did not exist to a greater degree. They also actively tried to facilitate the effort that eventually led to Air America and Democracy Radio (especially the latter), including inviting hosts to speak to the one of their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>482</sup> Jennifer Harper, "Liberal Talk Radio Studio Opens; Franken and Company Seek 'Level Playing Field," *The Washington Times*, January 18, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>483</sup> Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>484</sup> Robert, Interview With Author; Peter Ogburn also noted that unions supported and advertised on liberal radio; Ogburn, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>485</sup> Span, "Talk Radio Host Rhodes."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>486</sup> Eric Burns, Interview With Author; See also Mike Papantonio, Interview With Author.

caucus' weekly lunches in an effort to encourage rank and file senators to appear on talk radio. Further, they worked to raise the profile of local progressive hosts in the hopes of helping them to become syndicated.<sup>487</sup> Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) even hosted a fundraiser for Democracy Radio at her house that twenty Democratic senators attended, including Leader Daschle and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY). <sup>488</sup>

Yet, more broadly, most top elected Democrats did not elevate building a sustainable, liberal talk radio infrastructure over other competing priorities. Janet Robert and her husband, former Congressman Bill Luther, went to Washington to talk with party officials about what they had accomplished with their station. They pitched the idea of building a national investor base and employing a franchise model to build progressive talk stations across the country, but they found little interest. He party leadership also remained fairly disconnected from the New York based Air America effort, though members of Congress did provide aid in smaller ways; when Air America wanted to lease the broadcasting day on WLIB in New York, David Goodfriend asked Congressman Charlie Rangel (D-NY), his former boss, to call the station's owners, which he did. Here was no coordinated push from the top of the Democratic Party to prioritize building liberal radio.

Crucially, the party's top fundraisers never adequately valued funding and fundraising for a comprehensive liberal talk radio initiative. Kandie Stroud, the DNC's talk radio director encouraged Chairman Terry McAuliffe to ensure that Air America received funding. McAuliffe met with Air America's creators (who sold the venture to Montvel-Cohen), but a broader

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>487</sup> Russ Kelley, Interview With Author; Byron Dorgan, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>488</sup> Howard Kurtz, "A Voice From Above, And to the Left; North Dakota Talker Ed Schultz Is Set to Blanket Washington," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>489</sup> Robert, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>490</sup> Goodfriend, Interview With Author.

fundraising effort never materialized.<sup>491</sup> Senator Dorgan observed that conservative talk radio did not develop through support from the party infrastructure.<sup>492</sup> Yet, unlike conservative talk, liberal talk confronted key decision makers skeptical of its viability, and a dearth of quality outlets because many of the biggest stations already had successful formats. This disparity necessitated more involvement and coordination from the party's elected leadership, especially with regard to fundraising.

Air America's initial plan to purchase stations on which to broadcast its product mimicked the vertically integrated model employed by most of the conglomerates who dominated talk radio ownership. Its enormous expense, however, made this model incredibly difficult for a startup to employ. The risk inherent in such an ambitious venture rendered it unlikely to raise sufficient capital merely from people who considered it to be a solid financial investment. Rather, such an project required a coordinated push in which major liberal donors either invested substantially, or raised funds for the venture, unless one extremely wealthy liberal prioritized the project (a la Rupert Murdoch with Fox News).

Instead, the Democratic donor class remained largely aloof for four reasons. First, in spite of pleas from those involved with the format, they did not understand the value of building a permanent liberal media apparatus to help disseminate the Democratic message.<sup>493</sup> As Eric Burns explained, many conservative donors adopted a business-like, analytical approach to politics. They focused on long-term goals. By contrast, idealism drove liberal donors, who tended to be more emotional and looked for a quicker payoff. Thus, convincing them to contribute to an unsexy cause like building political infrastructure, which promised dividends only in the long

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>491</sup> Kandie Stroud, Interview With Author, April 8, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>492</sup> Dorgan, Interview With Author.

<sup>493</sup> Press, Toxic Talk, 255.

term, proved to be difficult.<sup>494</sup> Second, as Mike Papantonio noted, many of these groups and individuals, including George Soros and Democracy Alliance, only pursued their own ideas, and displayed disinterest in other projects and goals.<sup>495</sup>

Third, liberal donors did not see liberal radio as a good business investment. Marc Walsh largely unsuccessfully (outside of several million dollars in donations from the tech industry) solicited four types of donors during the months before Air America debuted. Liberal media investors, such as Hiam Saban, saw insufficient "sizzle" in Air America's business plan to donate. Similarly, Hollywood stars considered Air America to be far too risky to warrant investment. Ironically, they often contributed to Democratic candidates who had mixed prospects for success, because they evaluated such contributions through a different lens than they evaluated Air America.

Walsh also explained to leading Democratic politicians that Air America promised to help them to disseminate their message, and would provide cheap access and affordable air time for their advertisements. Yet, while many Democratic leaders rhetorically supported the effort, many party leaders understandably remained torn between building infrastructure, such as liberal media, and supporting candidates, especially at a time when Republicans had unified control of the government. Affordable arose because many leading Democratic fundraisers championed civility and good government, and abhorred the kind of politics that they perceived talk radio to promote. When Leader Daschle encouraged them to invest in liberal talk, they declined, lamenting the vacuous and poisonous nature of talk radio.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>494</sup> Eric Burns, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>495</sup> Mike Papantonio, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>496</sup> Janet Robert, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>497</sup> Daschle, Interview With Author.

Without prioritization<sup>498</sup> from the most powerful Democrats, redirecting donors's contributions from the political arena to liberal radio became nearly impossible. Bill Press spent hundreds of hours trying to convince wealthy liberal donors to invest in a powerful progressive media machine, without much success. These donors preferred to contribute to candidates, which enhanced their clout, and offered the promise of immediate gratification.<sup>499</sup> Mark Walsh similarly concluded that contributing to candidates tantalized with access to powerful politicians, invitations to swanky parties, and other perks that Air America could not match.<sup>500</sup>

#### Conclusion

Liberal radio faced significant headwinds from the day Rush Limbaugh's voice first boomed out nationally from behind the "golden EIB microphone." Limbaugh's popularity propelled a string of decisions that foreclosed opportunities for liberal talk on the biggest stations with the broadest reach. The existence of many other thriving spoken word formats and outlets that offered either a left of center cultural perspective, or otherwise siphoned potential listeners away from liberal radio, also lengthened the odds for the format. Nonetheless, opinion driven liberal radio doomed itself to a mixed track record (at best) by failing to understand that above all else, a talk radio host must entertain his or her listeners. Too often liberal talk radio hosts endeavored to educate their listeners, or envisioned themselves to be rectifying a political imbalance on the airwaves. This produced a dry, ponderous product that made overcoming the structural disadvantages impeding liberal radio impossible. The inherent tension between

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>498</sup> Creating such a large venture from the ground up required the entire Democratic leadership, including Clinton, Daschle, House Leaders Richard Gephardt and Nancy Pelosi, McAuliffe, etc. building a coordinated campaign to generate a sound financial base for the operation. The absence of this sort of an effort left the venture underfunded, and explained why a con-man like Montvel-Cohen grabbed onto the reigns of the project; the party chieftains could have ensured that the venture had sound leadership, or was in the hands of a steady, reliable party stalwart.

<sup>499</sup> Press, Toxic Talk, 255.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>500</sup> Walsh, Interview With Author.

elements of the best talk radio—simple, sometimes outrageous, black and white concepts that pushed boundaries and provoked controversy—and liberal thinking, which hesitated to offend and often recognized nuance, also hampered the format. Additionally, the grievances aired on liberal talk radio often lacked the personal nature of the complaints voiced on conservative radio, which fit better with talk radio's intimacy.

While some talented liberal hosts (usually those with substantial backgrounds in radio) thrived, building a prosperous format proved to be difficult without consistent programming, or the type of superstar host (like Limbaugh) who raised all tides. Additionally, in so much as liberal talk devolved into wonky policy discussion, it offered a product that had no market, as the listeners who wanted policy discussion shaped by liberal sensibilities already received a satisfying version of this product from NPR. After the 1990s, the effort to build liberal radio derived from the political word (and many of the failed liberal hosts during the 1990s were recovering politicians), which might explain why hosts misunderstood the purpose of talk radio. They mimicked what they heard in conservative radio, resulting in an angry dialogue aiming to achieve political goals. This material appealed to the hardest core liberals, but it limited the potential audience.

Liberal talk may prove to be more successful in the future as the delivery mechanism for the content on radio transitions away from terrestrial radio and towards a web platform. This transition will remove some of the entrance barriers that plagued liberal talk (such as the finite number of strong signaled stations). It will also allow for more experimentation, because a few companies will not control most of the medium's outlets, and it will change the industry's business model. This innovation may allow for the development of a style of liberal talk that

proves to be entertaining, unpredictable, and ultimately, profitable. As costs go down, the number of listeners required to turn a profit will decrease. The change in delivery mechanism may also shift the demographics of the medium in a more favorable direction for liberal talk (towards younger listeners). Liberals also have substantial internet infrastructure on which to build, and which might be used for cross-promotion—if liberal groups and bloggers can recognize the potential benefits of such solidarity. One could easily envision a synergistic relationship between liberal blogs, such as Daily Kos, and liberal talk programming.

Liberal consumers consistently had many outlets that satisfied their desires during the 1990s and the 2000s. Yet, the vast majority of those outlets aimed to provide a balanced perspective on the news of the day. Liberal sensibilities and a liberal cultural worldview undoubtedly shaped mainstream media coverage. Nonetheless, as the following chapters demonstrate, an explicit advocacy medium played a very different role in the political process than media shaped by liberal sensibilities that tried assiduously to be neutral, and dutifully reported on both sides's arguments. During individual political and policy battles, having explicit advocacy media on one side of the debate often influenced the outcome. More broadly, the liberal cultural outlook shaping mainstream media coverage might have contributed to the increasing cultural liberalism in America. But the failure of liberal radio left the political process without explicit liberal advocacy media (at least before the mid-2000s when MSNBC shifted to the left, and the blogosphere burgeoned).

## It's Complicated: Republicans Relationship With Talk Radio

In 1993, *National Review* declared Rush Limbaugh the leader of the opposition to the President Clinton.<sup>501</sup> Months earlier, Limbaugh received a letter from President Reagan that stated:

Thanks, Rush, for all you're doing to promote Republican and conservative principles. Now that I've retired from active politics, I don't mind that you've become the number-one voice for conservatism in our country. I know the liberals call you the most dangerous man in America, but don't worry about it; they used to say the same thing about me. Keep up the good work. America needs to hear the way things ought to be. Sincerely, Ron. <sup>502</sup>

Pollsters even included Limbaugh in some 1996 Republican presidential primary polls.<sup>503</sup> These occurrences marked an inflection point at which talk radio hosts emerged to fill the power vacuum left by the end of the George H.W. Bush Administration by becoming Republican Party leaders. At the time, Limbaugh was the only host with sufficient cachet to be a national party leader. However, many of his peers emerged as important local Republican leaders, and as syndication increased after 1997, other hosts joined Limbaugh on the national stage.<sup>504</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>501</sup> James Bowman, "Rush: The Leader of the Opposition," *National Review*, September 6, 1993.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>502</sup> "Tribute to Ronald Reagan," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired September 5, 1996 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>503</sup> "White House '96-New Hampshire: Campbell, Gramm, and Perot Check the Foliage," *The Hotline*, October 25, 1993; "Poll Update-Harris: Dole Maintains Lead in GOPstakes," *The Hotline*, January 3, 1995; Harris Poll, Aug, 1994. Retrieved Sep-20-2013 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

<sup>504</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella noted that Limbaugh was a party leader (46), and that conservative media figures fulfilled functions once associated with party leaders (xiii). They did not, however, explore the leadership function beyond messaging and rhetoric, nor did they explain the roots of hosts' power within the party, how they developed into leaders, or the way in which they interacted with elected Republicans. More broadly, the literature on political parties failed to mention this leadership role. By contrast, this chapter explored this phenomenon; Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

These hosts, however, were a new type of party leaders. 505 Unlike the party bosses of old, they did not select party nominees in smoke filled back rooms. Instead, they derived power from their ability to mobilize their listeners behind or against candidates and policies. Nor did they prioritize the party's electoral and policy agendas over other goals. Rather, their top priorities were building and entertaining the largest audience possible, and seeing their preferred policies enacted into legislation and/or scuttling legislation that they considered to be odious. The party's electoral success only came after these more important priorities. The hosts were conservatives first, Republicans second. As time progressed, they became more insistent that Republicans adhere to their preferred policy positions or face electoral defeat, even if that resulted in Democratic gains. Some hosts, such as Sean Hannity506 and Hugh Hewitt, were more loyal party men. Others, such as Neal Boortz, often performed party leadership functions, while being more iconoclastic and rebellious, and not always supporting the party's agenda.507

<sup>505</sup> This argument builds upon and adds a crucial element to the recent literature that explained that the political parties are not weak, as scholars once argued, but rather, when employing a definition of political party appropriate for the twenty-first century, are quite strong. Both Seth Masket in No Middle Ground and Marty Cohen, et. al. in The Party Decides argue for a broader conceptualization of political parties and party leadership in which ideological activists, interest groups, and donors control party nomination processes. Evan John Aldrich, who subscribes to a more traditional top down theory of political parties, admits that today's parties are coalitions in which ideologically driven activists are critical to mobilizing voters. Crucially, both Masket and Cohen et. al. argue that a desire to see their preferred policy agendas enacted into law drives these new types of party leaders, rather than the pursuit of party electoral success and/or enacting policies that enhance the party's electoral prospects. Significantly, neither argument mentions the potency or importance of ideological media personalities. By contrast, this chapter explains that these media figures are crucial local and national party titans who fit perfectly within an expanded definition of party leadership, and who are more powerful than other outsider party leaders because of their daily access to and ability to mobilize millions of likeminded listeners; Seth E. Masket, No Middle Ground How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2009); Marty Cohen, et. al., The Party Decides Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008); John H. Aldrich, Why Parties? A Second Look (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), see especially 286-292.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>506</sup> At times, Hannity attempted to declare independence from the Republican Party. Nonetheless, he remained far more loyal to the Bush Administration than some of his colleagues.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>507</sup> Boortz was a libertarian who at times supported Libertarian Party candidates.

Existing scholarship on the 1990s Republican Party offers minimal coverage of the impact of the development of talk radio on the party, and only portrays the way in which talk radio benefitted Republicans. 508 By contrast, this chapter argues that while hosts were indispensable advocates, allies, and conduits to the Republican base, increasingly with time, they constrained the ability of elected party leaders to construct a big tent party, and to compromise in order to govern and build a positive record on which to campaign. Additionally, because of their willingness to oppose the party's elected chieftains on major legislation and their ability to undermine several of the benefits of establishment support in a primary election, talk radio hosts have reduced the capacity of the party's titular leadership to lead the party and build consensus as to the party's goals and agenda. In fact, with hours of air time to fill, and a commercial imperative to entertain and to avoid boring audiences, talk radio was actually ideally suited to the needs and simple, incendiary rhetoric of conservative insurgents who wished to redirect the party and its policy stances. By contrast, talk radio hosts and establishment Republicans often had fundamentally dichotomous goals—producing good radio and governing and winning elections

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>508</sup> Among the many works on the rise of the new Republican Party, the 1994 takeover of Congress, and the freshman class in the 104th Congress are: Douglas L. Koopman, Hostile Takeover: The House Republican Party 1980-1995 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1996), Dan Balz and Ronald Brownstein, Storming the Gates: Protest Politics and the Republican Revival (Boston: Little Brown, 1996), William F. Connelly Jr. and John J. Pitney Jr., Congress' Permanent Minority: Republicans in the U.S. House (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1994), Nicol C. Rae, Conservative Reformers: the Republican Freshman and the Lessons of the 104th Congress (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), James G Gimpel, Legislating the Revolution: The Contract With America in its First Hundred Days (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996). Only Balz and Brownstein covered the development of talk radio, and Republicans utilization of the medium. But even they only discussed how talk radio aided in the Republican takeover of Congress, and they did not discuss the way in which the pact between talk radio hosts and Republicans also constrained the party. David Brock's chapter on talk radio also captured some of the way in which the party sought to disseminate its message through talk radio, and noted some cases in which talk radio may have affected electoral outcomes, but Brock misperceived and oversimplified the relationship between Republicans and talk radio hosts. He incorrectly portrayed hosts as mere conduits who disseminated the Republican message. In reality, hosts exerted a great deal of influence over the party and its agenda. They also rejected many pitches from Republican operatives; David Brock, The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 261-291.

respectively. As a result, talk radio substantially contributed to the increasing conservatism of the Republican Party, and thus, to the polarization and partisan rancor that characterized politics in the 2000s.<sup>509</sup>

#### **Hosts As Party Leaders**

Though talk radio hosts were not elected party leaders (such as the Republican National Committee (RNC) Chairman), they epitomized party leadership when defining it as having some modicum of power over the party's operation, agenda, and nominating process, while also providing aid to the party and its candidates, electorally and during governance. Of course, talk radio hosts shared party leadership with the party's elected chieftains, as well as with the leaders of conservative interest groups, grassroots leaders, and other conservative media figures. Yet, they were often among the most powerful figures in the party because of their high name recognition, their ability to reach thousands/millions of listeners per week, and their ability to mobilize those listeners. Talk radio hosts performed many of the tasks that one might define as being integral to party leadership including: fundraising, boosting voter turnout, building support for the party's candidates, disseminating the party's message, and involving themselves in primary elections to ensure that a preferred nominee represented the party. Additionally, talk radio hosts were uniquely capable of channeling conservative sentiment into specific campaigns,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>509</sup> Many scholars contend that rather than polarization, voters have merely sorted themselves into more ideologically coherent parties.

The definition of political party provided by Kathleen Bawn, et. al. underpins this notion of party leadership. They argue that "parties in the United States are best understood as coalitions of interest groups and activists seeking to capture and use government for their particular goals, which range from material self-interest to high-minded idealism. The coalition of policy-demanding groups develops an agenda of mutually acceptable policies, insists on the nomination of candidates with a demonstrated commitment to its program, and works to elect these candidates to office; Kathleen Bawn, et. al., "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (September 2012): 571.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>511</sup> Only a few local hosts have ever reached a million weekly listeners. By contrast, many top national talkers routinely reach a million listeners or more each week. Of course, reaching several hundred thousand listeners in a particular market with a message can have a substantial political impact.

and of framing electoral campaigns in such a way as to keep disgruntled conservatives on the Republican reservation.

What differentiated them (and other outsider party leaders) from the party's official leadership is that their primary loyalties were to an agenda (driven by their personal beliefs, not electoral calculations), their listeners, and to creating good radio, and not to the party's electoral success. Thus, they might support a primary candidate with whom they agreed philosophically, but who had less chance of winning a general election. Additionally, they might rally their listeners against a bill proposed by a Republican president, or rail against the elected Republican leadership. Even when they built support for Republicans, they argued in favor of a bill or candidate in the name of conservatism, not in the name of Republicanism. 512

Ample evidence exists depicting local and national radio hosts supporting, and campaigning with and for Republican candidates in every election cycle beginning in 1992.

Often times these hosts occupied roles traditionally played by celebrities and political "rockstars." For example, in 1992, Rush Limbaugh made exceptions to his no guest policy to interview Vice President Quayle and President Bush during the campaign's final months. Additionally, Limbaugh and colleague Bob Grant appeared at rallies with President Bush. In 1996, Congressman Mark Neumann even used a quote from radio host Charlie Sykes in a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>512</sup> Michael S. Johnson, Interview With Author, October 8, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>513</sup> "Quayle Invites Limbaugh to Be Debate Moderator," *The Associated Press*, October 2, 1992; "Candidate George Bush Visited Rush Limbaugh's Radio Show," *The St Louis Post Dispatch*, September 27, 1992; Michael Wines, "The 1992 Campaign: White House; Quayle Says Character Will Be Big Issue in Fall," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1992; Rush Limbaugh, Quayle Campaign Appearance, *The Rush Limbaugh Program*, July 7, 1992, <a href="http://www.c-span.org/video/?27000-1/QuayleCampaignApp">http://www.c-span.org/video/?27000-1/QuayleCampaignApp</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>514</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, aired November 2, 1992 (Multimedia Entertainment); Paul J Hendrie, "Stumping Through New Jersey Ridegewood Roars 20,000 Supporters Greet Bush At Rally," *The Record*, October 23, 1992; Terry Mutchler, "Bush Swings Through NJ Urging Voters to Ignore Polls, Trust Him," The Associated Press, October 22, 1992.

television commercial.<sup>515</sup> Such efforts continued and intensified in the late the 1990s and the 2000s.<sup>516</sup>

This aid had real impact because of hosts' reach, and their ability to mobilize millions of voters and potential donors each day. For example, regular talk radio appearances substantially benefitted for Republican challenger Saxby Chambliss in his 2002 race against Senator Max Cleland (D-GA). Chambliss' regular talk radio appearances allowed him to "be" in multiple towns at once, and also provided access to a large, and "captive," <sup>517</sup> audience as people sat in traffic. Statewide, Martha Zoller's popular program offered Chambliss an outlet for speaking to his base.<sup>518</sup> Additionally, as Chambliss was popular in his congressional district in the swing area of Middle Georgia, he could ensure victory by keeping the typically Republican Atlanta suburbs supportive. Initially, polling showed him trailing Cleland significantly, in part because of low name identification in these suburbs. Thus talk radio appearances allowed Chambliss to introduce himself to this cadre of conservative voters and improved his fortunes.<sup>519</sup> Talk radio also provided an outlet through which to criticize Cleland's record, both in interviews and unique, hard hitting fifteen second ads. Georgians liked Cleland personally, but knew little about his record.<sup>520</sup> Additionally, especially as the national significance of the race grew, Chambliss began to appear regularly on national talk radio, especially with Sean Hannity and Hugh Hewitt.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>515</sup> Associated Press, "Commercial Shows Influence of Conservative Talk Radio," The Associated Press, October 28, 1996.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>516</sup> Jeff Mayers and Mike Flaherty, "Close Calls Why Your Vote Counts," *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 1, 1998; Dave Boyer, "Bush Gains Momentum On Tour of Vital States," *The Washington Times*, July 31, 2000; George W Bush, "Remarks in Racine Wisconsin," *Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc.*, 40, no. 40, 2143; "Election Hot Sheet," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 30, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>517</sup> Michelle Grasso, Chambliss' communications director, explained that while listeners could always change stations, people tended to tune into one station and remain there, especially during drive time. Talk radio listeners liked the genre, and were likely to want to listen to an entire conversation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>518</sup> Michelle Grasso, Interview With Author, October 2, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>519</sup> Gene Ulm, Interview With Author, August 6, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>520</sup> Saxby Chambliss, Interview With Author, May 14, 2015.

These appearances produced surges in internet contributions to his campaign.<sup>521</sup> Finally, an election day appearance on Neal Boortz's program<sup>522</sup> aimed to get voters to the polls.

As they did for Chambliss, conservative talkers bolstered fundraising for Republican candidates, both by discussing races on the air and by headlining fundraisers. For example, in 1992, Limbaugh held a fundraiser for House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich, who had only won reelection by a razor thin margin in 1990.<sup>523</sup> Similarly, Hannity allowed Diana Irey, the 2006 Republican challenger to Representative John Murtha (D-PA), to explain to his listeners that her campaign most needed money, while encouraging them to donate and volunteer through her website.<sup>524</sup> Such appearances, or even a mention of a race on conservative talk programs, could be a financial boon to candidates (especially grassroots insurgents) because they transmitted information to a national network of donors, which allowed for significant internet fundraising. For example, after Christine O'Donnell won the 2010 Delaware Senate primary, Limbaugh suggested that his listeners donate to her campaign. Their response crashed O'Donnell's website, and produced over \$1 million in contributions in twenty-four hours.<sup>525</sup> While the internet made it easier for talk radio listeners to donate to a candidate, listeners had such loyalty to their favorite hosts that many would have sent checks to a candidate in the pre-internet days.<sup>526</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>521</sup> Grasso, Interview with Author; Paige Perdue, Interview With Author, October 9, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>522</sup> Boortz's show was syndicated across the country, but Atlanta was the program's home market.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>523</sup> Charles Walston, "Center's Limo Offers Voters A Taste of Gingrich Lifestyle," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 24, 1992

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>524</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, August 4, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' digital talk radio archive, which can be accessed only through computers in the Library, <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/</a> Webradiotoc.html.

<sup>525</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "What If Everyone in This Audience Sent Christine O'Donnell a Buck," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 15, 2010, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/15/">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/15/</a> what if everyone in this audience sent christine o donnell a buck; Rush Limbaugh, "Can Christine O'Donnell Raise Another Million in Next 24 Hours," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 16, 2010, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/16/can christine o donnell raise another million in next 24 hours2.">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/16/can christine o donnell raise another million in next 24 hours2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>526</sup> It would have been far harder to track such donations, because mailed donations would arrive at different times and from different post offices, etc.

The internet, however, lowered the barrier of entry for donors, and increased the potency of national talk radio as a fundraising tool. In contrast to the cumbersome and relatively time consuming process of contributing by mail, the internet allowed for "impulse" donations, where a listener became invested in a conversation between a host and a candidate and donated before changing his/her mind.<sup>527</sup>

Scott Brown's 2010 campaign for Senate exemplified how the internet and talk radio could work in tandem to bolster a candidate's fundraising.<sup>528</sup> The national media largely ignored the race, assuming that Brown could never win the Kennedy seat (which had been in the Kennedy family for all but three years dating back to 1952) in liberal Massachusetts. As the race progressed and tightened, however, conservative talkers took interest. When Brown mentioned his website on their programs, it drove traffic to the site and increased donations because potential contributors became aware that the race was close.<sup>529</sup> Accordingly, his advisers increased Brown's bookings on conservative media. Brown's campaign could often connect donations with talk radio discussion of the race. They would notice clusters of donations from a specific zip code at an odd time, which they then traced to a talk program airing on tape delay in that market.<sup>530</sup> A mention by a national talker could produce up to \$20,000 in donations.

Additionally, Brown's campaign built a "money bomb" designed to produce substantial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>527</sup> Perdue, Interview With Author.

Ironically, this case was one of the few in which conservative radio aided a moderate Republican. Conservative talkers supported Brown because he ran as a fairly conservative candidate (especially on fiscal issues) for Massachusetts in the special election to replace the late liberal Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA). Conservative talkers had a special incentive to support Brown's candidacy. A final version of President Obama's signature health care bill had yet to be agreed upon by both houses of Congress. Brown's election would deprive Democrats of the sixty votes they needed in the Senate to overcome a filibuster against the healthcare bill or any subsequent legislation. Thus, even if they disliked Brown's moderation, conservative talkers saw his election as a mechanism through which to stop President Obama from passing his agenda.

<sup>529</sup> Scott Brown, E-mail Message to Author, July 16, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>530</sup> Rob Willington, Interview With Author, September 19, 2013.

donations on January 11th. They hyped the "money bomb," on social media and the internet. They also offered an opportunity to pledge contributions on a website, which sent a reminder to pledged donors on the designated day. On that day, Brown appeared on Hannity and Laura Ingraham's radio shows. The "money bomb" dramatically exceeded the campaign's expectations, netting \$2.3 million, in part thanks to these talk radio appearances.<sup>531</sup>

Although ideologically motivated, most hosts understood the mutually beneficial relationship between conservatism and the Republican Party. Even when elected Republicans disgusted them, conservative talkers looked out for the party's interests, at least so long as they believed it to be a vehicle for achieving their policy goals and thwarting liberal ones. As with their support for Brown, as long as hosts could indirectly connect advocating for a candidate to achieving their agenda, they were largely willing to put aside disagreements and misgivings, with the exception of their growing intolerance towards moderates. Most hosts understood that Republican control of Congress offered the only possibility of advancing their preferred agenda, and sometimes control required supporting the most conservative candidate running for election, even if that Republican had moderate views.

The flip side of this party loyalty, however, was little tolerance for conservatives who supported compromise legislation that could harm the party politically. For example, in 2008, conservative hosts, including Limbaugh and Boortz, reacted with fury when Senator Chambliss and nine colleagues drafted a bipartisan energy bill. When Chambliss called Boortz to defend the effort, the host explained, "what I'm upset about is that Republicans have a winning issue here... that I think y'all just knocked the props out, from right underneath 'em."<sup>532</sup> As Limbaugh told

<sup>531</sup> Willington, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>532</sup> Jim Galloway, "Political Insider: Talk Radio's Eruption Over Chambliss and His Energy Agreement Spreads to Atlanta," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, August 11, 2008; Cynthia Tucker, "Bipartisan Energy Effort Gripes the Ideologues," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, August 13, 2008.

Chambliss, "the politics of this is what has some people upset."<sup>533</sup> Hosts disagreed with the substance of the energy bill (indeed, hosts supported conservative legislation that appeared to be politically toxic, because they prioritized achieving conservative policy over Republican electoral needs, and many believed that in the long run, conservative policy would be good politics). Nonetheless, they also could not countenance what they perceived to be a tactical blunder that damaged Republican electoral prospects.

#### **Rhetorical Leadership**

Hosts, especially Limbaugh, created and disseminated Republican talking points. In *Echo Chamber*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella argued that Limbaugh, Fox News, and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page formed a conservative media establishment (CME). This establishment should be expanded to include most other conservative hosts and the conservative blogosphere.<sup>534</sup> The CME worked cohesively<sup>535</sup> to craft and disseminate a message that helped to bind together the diverse Republican voting coalition of social conservatives and free market

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>533</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Senator Saxby Chambliss Calls Rush," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, August 8, 2008, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/8en\_saxby\_chambliss\_calls\_rush">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/8en\_saxby\_chambliss\_calls\_rush</a>.

<sup>534</sup> Many conservative talkers shared news from conservative blogs and publications with their listeners. Similarly, many conservative talkers either appeared frequently on Fox News, or like Hannity, or for periods of time, Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck, hosted their own radio and Fox News programs. Much of the message being broadcast by talk radio, Fox News, and the blogosphere was synced. Jamieson and Cappella focused on Limbaugh, Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board because, as the biggest fish in the conservative media pond, they had the most power to create and dictate a conservative message. Yet, the interconnected nexus that shaped, disseminated, and reinforced a conservative slant on the news included all hosts and the blogosphere.

<sup>535</sup> Some of the cohesion was unintentional. The CME did not have a morning message meeting as campaigns do. Rather, conservative media members consumed other conservative media. Additionally, many of the top conservative hosts including Limbaugh, Hannity, Boortz, and Mark Levin were friends and talked regularly; Randall Bloomquist, Interview with Author, August 27, 2012.

conservatives.<sup>536</sup> The CME also formed an echo chamber,<sup>537</sup> in which various outlets reinforced and amplified the same message, while insulating it from rebuttal by Democrats or the mainstream media. This message sidestepped Democratic attempts to stratify voters along economic lines, and instead redefined the political battle as pitting conservatives against a godless, patronizing, liberal cultural elite who threatened socially conservative values and common sense ideas, such as a balanced budget. Conservative media personalities thus gave their listeners a common enemy. That common enemy, in turn, was crucial to establishing and sustaining a group identity.<sup>538</sup>

As Jamieson and Capella, discuss, conservative talk show hosts also harnessed emotion to bond their audiences together as Republicans and conservatives and to distance them from the enemy, Democrats and liberalism. Limbaugh labeled candidates worth supporting Reagan conservatives (more broadly, talkers frequently glorified the Reagan years). By contrast, conservative hosts ridiculed Democrats and undermined their masculinity, thereby attaching strong negative affect to these Democrats in the minds of their listeners. For example, Limbaugh dubbed Senator John Kerry (D-MA), "Lurch Kerry-Heinz" and "Mr. Big Ketchup," indicating that he was stiff, robotic, and dominated by his wife, Heinz Ketchup heiress Teresa Heinz.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>536</sup> There were some exceptions to this general rule. For example, some conservative hosts, including Michael Savage, tended to be more iconoclastic. Others were more inclined towards libertarianism and deviated on social issues. Yet, as a general rule, hosts influenced one another and took part in this establishment.

<sup>537</sup> Ample evidence exists that many Americans only consume news from ideologically like-minded sources (see, for example, Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012)). Yet, a nascent literature argues that the case for echo chambers is overstated, and that most Americans either abstain from ideological news sources, and/or receive a much more balanced news diet than previously believed. See, for example, Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in an Age of Choice (Chicago Studies in American Politics)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), as well as the work of Michael J LaCour (<a href="http://www.mikelacour.com/media/">http://www.mikelacour.com/media/</a>)—the veracity of which has recently been called into question. See Gregory J. Martin, "Comment on LaCour (2014), 'The Echo Chambers are Empty,'" May 29, 2015, <a href="http://polisci.emory.edu/faculty/gimart2/papers/lacour">http://polisci.emory.edu/faculty/gimart2/papers/lacour</a> 2014 comment.pdf.

<sup>538</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, see especially 62-76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>539</sup> Ibid., 126-140.

Nicknames that emasculated male Democrats humorously conveyed the broader Republican message that Democrats were weak on defense and terrorism, not to mention talk radio.<sup>540</sup> Conversely, conservative talk radio often portrayed strong liberal women as being shrill. For example, on a 2005 show, Sean Hannity introduced comments from Senator Hillary Clinton with the feminist Helen Reddy song, "I Am Woman," (which featured the lyric I am women, hear me roar), overdubbed with clips of Clinton screaming.<sup>541</sup>

Conservative hosts also used the techniques of framing, priming, and inoculation to make their listeners' support for Republican candidates and causes more durable and resistant to counter persuasion.<sup>542</sup> These techniques reduced the chances that listeners would defect, both ideologically and politically. Conservative hosts contested facts that supported Democratic claims, while championing facts consistent with conservative claims. Limbaugh inoculated his audience against charges to which conservatives were vulnerable by presenting, and then rebutting them.<sup>543</sup>

The persistent talk radio supported meme that the mainstream media was biased, hypocritical, and inaccurate constituted one method of inoculation. Hosts leveled this charge in their usual fun manner, giving nicknames to mainstream media outlets and personalities in an effort to discredit them.<sup>544</sup> Limbaugh referred to the liberal cable network MSNBC as PMSNBC.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>540</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 184-85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>541</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, March 11, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>542</sup> Priming refers to a media source's ability to make one criterion for a decision assume greater importance in the audience's collective consciousness than another. Media frames are organizing structures that tell audiences "what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration." They "affect the likelihood that particular options will be selected" by the audience. Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 82; 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>543</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 142.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>544</sup> Jamieson and Cappella note that Limbaugh discussed the mainstream media on every program from January to November, 1996. This finding demonstrates how talk radio slowly and methodically worked to build this meme; Ibid., 169.

Given the gender stereotypes that Limbaugh's discourse utilized and perpetuated, this moniker was likely intended to associate the network with visions of shrill, angry women in the minds of his listeners. Reminding his listeners that the mainstream media was boring and inaccurate, Limbaugh dubbed *U.S. News and World Reports* as US Snooze, Meet the Press as Meet the Depressed, and ABC News' Sam Donaldson as Sam "the sham" Donaldson. More broadly, Limbaugh referred to the mainstream media as the drive by media, thereby connecting it to visions of violent crime, in the media's case, crime that violated truth and fairness. By reinforcing their listeners distrust of the mainstream media, talk radio hosts increased the likelihood that mainstream media exposure would not reduce their listeners' conservatism, nor would evidence presented by the mainstream media create doubts about conservative talking points. Listeners were also less likely to even consult mainstream media sources because of this argument. S46

This frame was especially critical during campaign season when both sides made claims and counterclaims that required a neutral arbiter to ferret out the truth. Talk radio hosts portrayed themselves as such arbiters, while discounting the mainstream media as hopelessly biased. For example, in the last two months before the 1994 elections, Limbaugh repeatedly highlighted three different forms of mainstream media bias. First, he showed the press to be hypocritical. For

<sup>545</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion of Prosecutor Marcia Clark, Mario Cuomo and the Upcoming Congressional Elections," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 6, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Comments on the Limbaugh Ad For the New York Times and the NOW Boycott; Ordinary Citizens Stopping Crime in the City; Mainstream Media's Complaints of Not Being as Powerful As They Used to Be," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 21, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Discussed Mario Cuomo's Election Strategy, Ross Perot's and Rudolph Guliani's '94 Endorsements, Texas Opinion Poll of Perot, and Research Study Showing Link Between Abortions and Breast-Cancer Risks," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired November 2 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Jamieson and Cappella provide additional examples of the unflattering nicknames that Limbaugh gave to prominent journalists; Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>546</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 39, 71, 125.

instance, he repeatedly played video of President Clinton publicly making a simple arithmetic mistake, which was not widely reported. Limbaugh contrasted the story with the ridicule heaped upon former Vice President Dan Quayle after he misspelled potato. He editorialized, "this is an illustration of media bias or unfairness or partiality or what have you."<sup>547</sup>

Limbaugh also showed his viewers how the press identified with Democrats. He played a clip of NBC's Gwen Ifil noting that the House of Representatives was "not in danger right now." Limbaugh translated that to mean, "I don't think we're going to lose the House of Representatives." He noted that he "just loves all of this objectivity in the mainstream media." Finally, Limbaugh demonstrated that the press actively tried to aid Democrats. One night he spotlighted a *New York Times* headline noting "Democrats Getting No Lift From a Rising Economy," as well as a similar headline in the *Washington Post*. He explained the true meaning of these headlines. "Why isn't the president getting credit? It's just not fair. He's doing such a good job and you people'--can you imagine this kind of stuff being written about Reagan or Bush--if they're doing well and not getting credit for it? These people would be leading the charge saying they shouldn't get credit." He cited statistics to argue that the economy was not, in fact, all that improved, which, of course, made the headlines appear that much more biased to his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>547</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired November 1, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>548</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Talks About a Personal Letter From Former President Ronald Reagan And Does a Presentation Of Various Campaigns Around The Country," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 17, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

viewers.<sup>549</sup> As Limbaugh spotlighted these tropes daily, his audience could only become increasingly mistrustful of the mainstream media and less likely to accept facts presented by the press with which they disagreed. This charge of bias effectively blunted stories that could not be refuted substantively, because it distracted from their substance.

For example, in 2002, Republican Senate leader Trent Lott joked that the country would have had fewer problems if more states had supported Strom Thurmond's segregationist presidential campaign in 1948. As Jamieson and Cappella depicted, instead of defending Lott, Limbaugh highlighted Republican contributions to Civil Rights legislation and pointed out how prominent Democrats had opposed this legislation. He attacked Democrats and the "liberal media" for hypocritically failing to condemn Democrats who made equally intemperate remarks, including Senator Robert Byrd (WV), a former member of the Ku Klux Klan and a party leader. In the same vein, Hannity noted that liberals had not condemned President Clinton for presenting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>549</sup> Among other nights, Limbaugh discussed some form of media bias on September 5th, October 7th, October 17th, October 18th, October 21st, October 26th, and November 1st. I cite these examples from his TV show, because it seems likely that he would have discussed the topic even more on his radio program, because he had fifteen hours per week on radio, as opposed to two and a half on television. The only main difference content wise between the two programs was that Limbaugh could use video on the TV program; Rush Limbaugh, "Florida Orange Juice Sales Rose In July Despite NOW Boycott; Abe Lincoln's Wife Abused Him Physically; Democrats Up for Re-Election Avoid Link With Clinton; Environmental Wacko Communes With Trees," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired September 5, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Discusses Upcoming Elections and Various Campaigns; The Clinton Administration and the Labor Department's Job Corps Program," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 7, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Talks About a Personal Letter From Former President Ronald Reagan and Does a Presentation of Various Campaigns Around the Country," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 17, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion of Senatorial Election Races in Massachusetts and Virginia, Fashion and Its Effect on Feminism, The New York Times and Lack of Credit Perceived by Democrats For Improvement in the Economy," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 18, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Comments on the Limbaugh Ad for The New York Times and the NOW Boycott; Ordinary Citizens Stopping Crime in the City; Mainstream Media's Complaints of Not Being as Powerful as They Used to Be," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 21, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Comments on the New Jersey Senate Race, The Homework Issue at Cabrillo Unified School, Debate Between Senator Kennedy, and Mitt Romney, and Estimates What a Candidate Spends Per Vote They Receive," Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 26, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, Rush Limbaugh, produced by Roger Ailes, aired November 1, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

Senator J William Fullbright, "a known segregationist," with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Eventually, both hosts moved proactively to protect the party's image and suggested that Lott should step aside as Republican leader.<sup>550</sup>

Key talkers such as Limbaugh and Hannity comfortably cited double standards and hypocrisy instead of defending Lott, not only because it was easier to do so, but also because their arguments fit with familiar tropes for listeners of their programs. Hannity regularly referred to Senator Byrd as Robert "KKK" Byrd. 551 This case subsequently became part of the longer running frame regarding double standards applying to the parties and the media's treatment of them. In 2005, Hannity did a radio segment on Byrd after his television cohost, Alan Colmes, interviewed the senator.<sup>552</sup> He declared that if any Republican or conservative had a Ku Klux Klan past, or if any Republican had uttered the "N word" in an interview, he or she would not be leading the Republican Party. He declared, "this [Byrd's leadership in the Democratic Party and the media's willingness to acquiesce] was the "latest, greatest" example of a double standard in politics and media. He informed his listeners that "even though Dan Rather is gone, 553 this institutionalized media bias still exists." He played a clip of Byrd declaring that the KKK was in the past and that he had apologized for it. Hannity wondered, "Did Trent Lott get a Pass? Trent Lott apologized five separate times for telling a joke about Strom Thurmond. Telling a joke about a guy. Not the actual guy. And the same people who were calling for his head give this guy, the

<sup>550</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, Echo Chamber, 20-41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>551</sup> Similarly, Limbaugh referred to Byrd as Robert "Sheets" Byrd.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>552</sup> "Sen. Robert Byrd Talks With Alan Colmes," <u>Foxnews.com</u>, published March 11, 2005, <u>http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/03/11/sen-robert-byrd-talks-with-alan-colmes/.</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>553</sup> Rather resigned as anchor of the *CBS Evening News* after revelations that he broadcast a story questioning President Bush's National Guard Service based upon forged documents.

former Klansman, a pass. This drives me nuts."554 Thus, even after Lott's case receded from the spotlight, talk radio utilized it to demonstrate that the press and Democrats did not treat Republicans fairly.

These rhetorical strategies successfully rallied talk radio listeners behind Republicans.

Jamieson and Cappella offered evidence that regular listeners to Limbaugh's program during the 1996 presidential campaign believed that President Clinton's positions on issues like Medicare spending and missile-defense were further from their own stances than they were in reality.

Additionally, they indicated that Limbaugh listeners felt more negative emotions towards Clinton and more positive emotions towards challenger Bob Dole than respondents who did not listen to talk radio, or who listened to other liberal or conservative hosts. This benefitted Dole because the more emotion that a respondent reported, the more likely he/she was to participate in political activities. Further, scholarly research indicates that listening to talk radio increased the likelihood of someone voting Republican in 1994, and switching his/her vote from Democratic to Republican between 1992 and 1994 and 1994 and 1996. These methods were also successful

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>554</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, March 11, 2005, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>555</sup> It is possible that Limbaugh's listeners felt more negatively towards Clinton and more positively towards Dole than listeners to other conservative programs because many of those programs had liberal guests. As such, listeners were exposed to the Democratic perspective, whereas Limbaugh's listeners only heard his perspective and the occasional interview with a conservative.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>556</sup> Jamieson and Cappella., Echo Chamber, 134-39; 195-210.

<sup>557</sup> One weakness of this research was disentangling cause from effect. Did talk radio change listeners' votes or did it attract people who were otherwise inclined to vote Republican; David Barker's statistical analysis controls for party, ideology, religion and other potential factors that might have influenced how a respondent voted. Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 134-36; 199; 232; ,527-539; David C. Barker, *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio*, *Persuasion, And American Political Behavior* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)) David Barker, "Rushed Decisions, Political Talk Radio and Voter Choice, 1994-1996," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no 2 (May 1999): 532-35; Barker and Kathleen Knight, "Political Talk Radio and Public Opinion," *the Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 149-170; Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, Douglas Muzzio, "Dial in Democracy: Talk Radio and the 1994 Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 461-64; 466; 469.

in the broader ideas war. Jameson and Cappella's evidence indicated that Limbaugh's listeners and Fox News viewers were more likely to accept Republican claims and reject Democratic ones than the audience for other media sources.<sup>558</sup>

Talk radio also provided Republicans with access to their base in moments of crisis. 559 As former House Republican leadership aide John Feehery explained, Republican leaders risked having no support if they failed to maintain the loyalty of their base at these moments. Thus, repeatedly during the 1990s, House Speaker Gingrich appeared on Limbaugh's program when he faced heavy criticism. 560 Similarly, when a 2006 scandal raised questions about whether House Speaker J Dennis Hastert acted appropriately when informed about Representative Mark Foley (R-FL)'s improper relationship with teenage House pages, Hastert sought refuge in conservative radio. Amidst condemnation and calls for his resignation, Hastert did interviews with at least nine national hosts, even including Neal Boortz, who had suggested days earlier that Hastert should find a "better excuse" for his initial inaction. When talking with Limbaugh, Hastert agreed that the massive uproar over the scandal represented an attempt by Democrats and the liberal media to repress conservative turnout in the upcoming midterm elections. 561

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>558</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 232.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>559</sup> These appearances benefitted the hosts because they got to discuss the major issue of the day with the key principal in the story, and their conversation was often an exclusive, which demonstrated the host's importance in the media landscape, while also benefitting the party; For another example see Michael D Shear and Tim Craig, "Allen Calls Webb Aide, Apologizes for Remark," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2006.

Side of the Right," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 1997; "Analysis: New Revelations in the Paula Jones-Bill Clinton Sexual Harassment Case; Political Correctness on Capitol Hill, *Meet the Press*, June 22, 1997; Katharine Q. Seelye, "Gingrich Moves to Turn Back Any Challenge to Leadership," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1997; "House GOP Conservatives Warn Leadership On Agenda," *Congress Daily*, March 21, 1997; Laurie Kellman, "Term-limits Supporters Shift Focus to White House Media Blitz Puts Pressure on Democrats Before Next Week's Debate, *The Washington Times*, March 21, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>561</sup> Jeff Zeleny with Jim Rutenberg and Kate Zernike, "Hastert, a Political Survivor, Vows to Overcome Scandal," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2006; Dana Milbank, "A Few Conservative Voices Still Speak for the Speaker," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2006; "Denny, But Not Out," *The Hotline*, *National Briefing*, October 4, 2006."

Ron Bonjean, Hastert's former Communications Director, explained that in a moment of crisis, talk radio offered a sympathetic platform through which an embattled Republican leader could get his message out and influence the mainstream media. Reporters needed quotes from Hastert, and since he only appeared on friendly talk radio programs, Hastert forced them to quote these appearances. Bonjean indicated that Republican communications staffers awarded these coveted interviews to the hosts who were most likely to provide a friendly forum for their bosses.

Thanks to their platform, talk radio hosts, unlike other "outsider" party leaders, had a megaphone with which to raise stories that the mainstream media might not consider newsworthy, or might be uncomfortable airing, either because they lacked verification, or because reporters considered the issue to be out of bounds in some way.<sup>562</sup> As Limbaugh explained to his TV audience, "I am here to find the things that you may spot yourself, but certainly the mainstream media would not."<sup>563</sup> For example, during the 1992 Presidential campaign, President Bush scrupulously avoided personally addressing the controversial issue of then-Governor Clinton's draft record until Limbaugh questioned him about it during an interview. As Limbaugh's audience found the issue to be important and relevant, the President felt comfortable accusing Clinton of lying about his draft record.<sup>564</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>562</sup> Mark Mellman, Interview With Author, October 11, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>563</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Comments On The New Jersey Senate Race, The Homework Issue At Cabrillo Unified School, Debate Between Senator Kennedy and Mitt Romney And Estimates What a Candidate Spends Per Vote They Receive, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 26, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment). <sup>564</sup> Limbaugh even attempted to frame his exchange with Bush, noting on his television program that Bush responded to a question about the draft, rather than launching into an ad homonym attack that would have violated his pledge not to attack on the issue; John W. Mashek, "Bush Accuses Clinton of Failure to Come Clean on Vietnam," *The Boston Globe*, September 22, 1992, 1; Frank J. Murray, "Bush Tells Foe to 'Come Clean' First Direct Jab on Draft Issue, *The Washington Times*, September 22, 1992, A1; Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, September 21, 1992; Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired September 21, 1992 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

Talk radio was the ideal medium for making this sort of claim because it shielded voters who might be offended by a personal attack, or who might consider the issue irrelevant or out of bounds, from Republicans' rhetoric. 565 At most, these voters might see a newspaper story recapping the exchange, but they did not generally tune into conservative talk. 566 Especially in down ballot races, which received less mainstream media coverage, this messaging occurred under the radar. Yet, it energized base voters by signaling that the candidate cared about the issues important to them. The medium thus allowed politicians to walk a tight rope, appearing to be more moderate when utilizing mass media, while targeting a far more conservative message to their base.

When this type of story raised legitimate questions about a Democrat's character, but had questionable importance or veracity, Republicans used talk radio to share it with their base and to pressure the mainstream media to cover it. In some cases, talk radio even originated this sort of story and forced the political class *and* the press to address it. For example, on the eve of the 2006 elections, Senator John Kerry joked during a college appearance, "Education, if you make the most of it, you study hard, you do your homework and you make an effort to be smart, you

soft Talk radio may be the missing link in a chain discussed by Hawn, et. al. These scholars argued that inattentive and ill-informed voters only penalized extreme voting behavior infrequently because of "the limited capacity of voters to discern extreme policy agendas for what they are." Talk radio provided a vital method for keeping the majority of voters insulated from the extremism that legislators embraced to win nominations. Candidates could appear on talk radio to signal rhetorically to crucial primary voters that they were loyal allies who worked to implement a preferred agenda without turning off centrists because median voters did not listen to talk radio; Hawn, et. al, "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," 583.

566 For example, 62.2% of regular or sometimes Limbaugh listeners who responded to a 1998 Pew media consumption survey were conservative or very conservative. Additionally, conservatives constituted an average of 67.33% of Limbaugh's audience according to the same biennial Pew surveys between 2002 and 2010; For some reason, Pew did not ask respondents in 2000 whether they listened to Limbaugh; Pew actually computed slightly higher numbers for this period, as they employ demographic weighting when reporting data; Along with my statistical support adviser Doug Allen, I calculated these statistics using SPSS. Our numbers differ slightly from the figures reported by Pew in their biennial reports, because Pew employs demographic weighting when calculating their data.

can do well. And if you don't, you get stuck in Iraq."567 Kerry's remarks received little attention before radio host John Ziegler saw the one local news report that mentioned them in passing. He led his show with the story, playing the clip ten times in three hours. Conservative bloggers picked up the clip from Ziegler's website, prompting Matt Drudge to display it prominently on the Drudge Report; the story went viral. When Senator John McCain demanded that Kerry apologize the next morning, the story led the day's news cycle.<sup>568</sup>

A few days later, Milwaukee host Charlie Sykes posted a picture on his website of some American servicemen holding up a sign that said, "help us John Kerry, we are stuck here in Iraq." The sign included intentional misspellings. Demand for the image was so great that it crashed Sykes' website server.<sup>569</sup> Again, the mainstream media picked up the story. Finally, Limbaugh asked President Bush about Kerry's quip. Bush replied, "our troops deserve the full support of people in government. People here may not agree with my decision. I understand that. But what I don't understand is any diminution of their sacrifice."570 The mainstream media reported Bush's remarks.<sup>571</sup> Thus, three separate times talk radio created a news story that the mainstream media had to address regarding Kerry's poorly chosen attempt at humor. Without talk radio, the national media might never have known about Kerry's comments, or might have written the remarks off as an unimportant botched joke. Talk radio's ability to bring attention to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>567</sup> Peter Baker and Jim VandeHei, "Kerry Offers Apology to Troops, *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>568</sup> John Ziegler, "How the John Kerry Gaffe Story Really Broke, *Talkers Magazine*, no. 173 (November 2006): 1 &

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>569</sup> Bob von Sternberg, "Minnesota Unit Behind `Irak' Sign; Members of the 1/34 Brigade Troops Battalion From Minnesota's National Guard Devised the Retort to Sen. John Kerry After His Controversial Comments During a Speech," The Minneapolis Star-Tribune, November 3, 2006; Niles Lathern and Todd Venezia, "Genius GIs' Joy at Last Laugh - Inside Unit That Outwitted Kerry," The New York Post, November 3, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>570</sup>Rush Limbaugh, "Rush's Interview with President George W. Bush," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 1, 2006, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2006/11/01/rush s interview with president george w bush.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>571</sup> Kerry Apologizes For Clumsy Attempt At Joke; Some Report Current Level of Violence in Iraq Getting Ominously Close To Chaos; Marty Meehan Interview; Dick Armey Interview, The Situation Room, CNN, November 1,2006.

this type of story benefitted Republicans with culturally conservative voters who found

Democratic issue positions attractive, but voted on likability or character. By discrediting

Democratic messengers, Republicans prevented these sympathetic or undecided voters from considering the Democratic argument.

Although typically beneficial, the attraction of red meat stories and Democratic scandals to talk radio presented some downside for Republicans because hosts addressed stories that went too far. During the Clinton Administration, talk radio often reported dubiously sourced scandals that bordered on being outlandish. For example, Limbaugh passed along a story that White House Counsel Vince Foster, who committed suicide, had been murdered in an apartment owned by First Lady Hillary Clinton.<sup>572</sup> Once talk radio generated intense interest in these stories among conservatives, elected Republicans often had to address them, sometimes officially by holding hearings.

Addressing these more outlandish rumors, especially once nothing became of them, portrayed Republicans as partisan and extreme to independents and moderates. Talk radio's interest in these stories left Republicans trapped between a base that demanded action, and centrists who considered the stories to be ridiculous, petty, and vituperative. Additionally, these stories hardened the views of the Republican base towards Clinton, which made it that much

Whitewater Weirdness; How A Four-Hour Gap in L.J. Davis's Life Became a Pause Celebre, *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1994; John Aloysius Farrell, "White House Cleared In Death Of Aide Foster Fisk Finds No Blocking of S&L Probe," *The Boston Globe*, July 1, 1994; Susan Schmidt, "Foster's Family Pleads For End of Public Scrutiny," *The Buffalo News*, July 21, 1994; Anthony Lewis, "Abroad at Home: The Grassy Knoll," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1994; David L Michelmore, "Right Wingers Claim Clinton Lawyer's Death is a Cover-Up," *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, April 30, 1995; John Yemma, "Object of Disaffection Mrs. Clinton Suffers Slings and Arrows of Radio Outrage," *The Boston Globe*, January 26, 1996; Michael Isakoff and Mark Miller, "Road to a Subpoena.(Hillary Rodham Clinton Faces a Grand Jury)," *Newsweek* 127, no. 6 (February 5, 1996): 32; Brock, *Republican Noise Machine*, 286.

more difficult politically for Republicans to compromise, as was necessary to govern during divided government.<sup>573</sup> This pattern would repeat itself with the next Democratic President, Barack Obama. Focusing on these scandals or issues also obstructed the Republican agenda by distracting from it, occupying committee and floor time, and driving both Presidents Clinton and Obama towards their base, which made it more difficult for them to compromise as well.<sup>574</sup>

#### 1994

The 1994 election cycle offers a case study of how talk radio hosts assumed traditional and unique leadership roles in the Republican Party in the year in which their leadership had the largest electoral impact.<sup>575</sup> First, the conversation on conservative radio helped to motivate quality Republican candidates to run for Congress. According to Bill Paxon (R-NY), who chaired the National Republican Congressional Committee, talk radio convinced these candidates that an opportunity existed for Republicans in spite of press reports to the contrary. Furthermore, talk radio helped channel conservative anger into campaigns throughout the country.<sup>576</sup> Local conservative talkers fulfilled many traditional leadership roles during the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>573</sup> Their base viewed Clinton as illegitimate and corrupt, which left these voters unwilling to countenance their party's elected officials compromising with him.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>574</sup> The next chapter details how talk radio hosts contributed to President Clinton's impeachment. Steve Gillon's *The Pact* detailed how Clinton and Speaker Gingrich negotiated a framework to reform the entitlement programs. This deal fell apart when discussion of impeaching Clinton began, because Clinton and Gingrich needed the support of their respective bases in the impeachment fight, and their proposal promised to anger both bases; Steve M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined A Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>575</sup> There is significant skepticism, both among political professionals and scholars, that talk radio can have a decisive impact on electoral outcomes. Yet, if there was a year in which talk radio played a substantial role in electoral outcomes, it was 1994, when, because of several unique factors, talk radio had a greater impact than it would subsequently have. These factors included many Republican leaning districts with veteran Democratic incumbents, Limbaugh, who had only recently become a cultural phenomenon, and the purity of talk radio support for House Republicans, who had yet to anger hosts with the decisions that they would later make in the interest of governing. Without talk radio, Republican congressional candidates would have had greater difficulty defeating Democratic incumbents simply because they would have struggled to get their message out thanks to being substantially outspent in paid media, and because the mainstream media paid minimal attention to most individual House races because they considered it unlikely that Republicans could capture control of the House.

<sup>576</sup> Bill Paxon, Interview With Author, September 20, 2012.

campaign.<sup>577</sup> For example, Seattle talker Kirby Wilbur contributed to Republican challenger Randy Tate, canvassed for him, emceed a fundraiser, and frequently hosted Tate on his show. Wilbur also dispatched angry listeners to disrupt campaign events held by Tate's opponent, Representative Mike Kreidler. New York's Bob Grant aided Republican Michael Forbes simply by mentioning his campaign to unseat Representative George Hochbrueckner, which lit up the phone lines in Forbes' campaign offices.<sup>578</sup>

Furthermore, talk radio provided Republicans with an outlet, which in many cases offset the incumbency advantage held by Democrats. For example, in the Washington State district of House Speaker Tom Foley, challenger George Nethercutt had to utilize every avenue available to him because the Speaker had a two to one spending advantage in paid media. Talk radio also allowed Nethercutt to bypass the traditional media in the district, most of which showed deference to the Speaker because of his position. As such, it was difficult for Nethercutt to get coverage from the district's newspapers and television stations. By contrast, local talk radio, which was just coming into its own, gave Nethercutt an opportunity to share his message with the district's voters. Nethercutt appeared with Richard Clear, a supportive local host. He felt as though talk radio galvanized his supporters and kept their attention focused on the race.<sup>579</sup> From the time that Nethercutt's campaign staff walked into the office in the morning until they left at night, the phones rang off the hook with callers who had heard about the campaign on the radio.<sup>580</sup> Scott Hogenson, who ran the RNC's talk radio program in 1994, also labored to get a conservative message out in Washington state. None of the primary talk radio hosts in the district

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>577</sup> See, for example, Dan Horn, "Chabot Battles the Clock," *The Cincinnati Post*, October 31, 1994;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>578</sup> Leslie Phillips, "Talk Radio Hosts Crank Up The Political Volume// On the Airwaves, the Prime Topic Is Voter Dissatisfaction," *USA Today*, October 26, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>579</sup> George Nethercutt, Interview With Author, February 24, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>580</sup> Ken Lisaius, Interview With Author, October 12, 2012.

were amiable to Foley—one asked him during an interview about rumors that he was homosexual, and another referred to him as the sphincter of the house.<sup>581</sup>

Talk radio aided Mark Souder's (R-IN) quest to unseat popular incumbent Jill Long in a different way. Daily talk radio appearances, along with cable television outside of the district's urban center, allowed Souder to build momentum beneath the radar. Because Long's campaign team did not detect this momentum, they did not use their large monetary advantage to blunt it. Souder kicked off his fall campaign on Paul Phillips' local morning program, and Phillips promoted Souder's candidacy through election day. Additionally, Souder's campaign employed a large radio budget, targeted towards talk radio, Christian radio, and country music radio, to allow Souder to flexibly and rapidly respond to charges. Souder's diverse background allowed him to write and deliver his own sixty second response ads.<sup>582</sup>

As Saxby Chambliss, a member of the freshman class elected in 1994, summarized, "we all used it on the Republican side to a great extent." According to Chambliss, hosts beginning their ascent in popularity enjoyed hosting the candidates. Conversely, these appearances helped candidates like him to raise money and win support.<sup>583</sup>

Nationally, Limbaugh's coverage of campaigns demonstrated some of the unique party leadership tasks performed by conservative talkers. In describing his impact on the 1994 elections, a 1995 documentary called Limbaugh "a national precinct captain for the conservative movement and the Republican Party." 584 He labored to keep his listeners and television viewers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>581</sup> Jeffrey R. Biggs and Thomas S. Foley, *Honor in the House* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1999), 252-253; Jim Camden, Interview with Author; Bob Shrum, Interview With Author, October 7, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>582</sup> Mark Souder, E-mail Message to Author, September 26, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>583</sup> Saxby Chambliss, Interview With Author, May 14, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>584</sup> "Rush Limbaugh's America," PBS Frontline, season 13, episode 11, directed by Marian Marzynski, produced by Steve Talbot, aired February 28, 1995, accessed via Youtube, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWD\_F6sZ5dE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWD\_F6sZ5dE</a>, posted on August 22, 2014.

energized, and to discredit any press narrative that might damage Republican chances. Limbaugh also directly criticized Democratic congressmen and senators in close races and bolster Republicans. He focused on material that showed high profile Democrats to be vulnerable, and which portrayed Democrats as arrogant, entitled, condescending, hypocritical, disingenuous, and forced to run away from President Clinton.

While Limbaugh frequently targeted favorite Republican punching bags, including Speaker Foley and Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), he also kept his audience posted on close races in conservative places where he might have a greater impact. In one television program, he played ads in which three Democratic senators touted conservative stands they had adopted as evidence that Democrats had to run away from Clinton. Limbaugh fact checked one of the ads, arguing that Democrats were lying about how close they were to Clinton.<sup>585</sup>

Additionally, Limbaugh repeatedly aired a clip of Senator Jim Sasser (D-TN) saying that Tennesseans' investment in him was on the verge of paying off because he was on the precipice of becoming Senate Majority Leader. Limbaugh interpreted Sasser as saying, "Please elect me. I want this job so bad. I've earned this job. I want it so bad. You've got to send me back there so I can have this job.' What is he saying? He's saying the only thing he cares about is being Senate majority leader, and when you say that all you care about is getting more power in Washington, I don't think that's going to fly."586 Limbaugh even played a campaign commercial cut for Representative James Inhofe's Oklahoma Senate campaign that never aired because it was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>585</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion on Barbara Streisand, President Clinton and Political Ads for Democratic Candidates," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 4, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment). <sup>586</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Comments on Roseanne Barr; Household Contributions to Organizations Are Down; Advertisements Regarding the Congressional Elections; And the Use of Morphing to Create Ads for the Congressional Elections," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 19, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

deemed by campaign operatives to be too harsh towards Inhofe's opponent.<sup>587</sup> When Senator Sasser shrewdly purchased ad time on Limbaugh's program to trumpet his support for school prayer and school choice, Limbaugh undermined any potential benefit by questioning the authenticity of the ads. He noted that nowhere outside of the 1994 campaign would a Democrat ever associate himself with such issues.<sup>588</sup>

Limbaugh also promoted Republican candidates and questioned the validity of any potentially damaging charges against them. For example, when former presidential candidate Ross Perot endorsed Governor Ann Richards (D-TX) in her reelection fight against George W Bush, Limbaugh wrote the endorsement off as, "nothing but sour grapes at the Bush family."589 Similarly, in introducing a clip from a debate in the Florida Governor's race, Limbaugh described, "Jeb Bush, a legitimate conservative—Jeb Bush is running for Governor of Florida." This description signaled to those audience members who considered Bush's father to be unacceptably moderate that his son was worthy of support.<sup>590</sup>

Limbaugh framed the election in pro-Republican terms. Twice he soothingly portrayed the provisions of the Contract for America as non-threatening for his television viewers. The contract simply meant that "the people [would] debate these issues for the first time, because the Democrats, who care about winners and losers, won't even let these issues come to the floor of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>587</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion of Ronald Reagan's Affliction, Political Campaigns in New York, Oklahoma, Massachusetts with Footage of Public Service Announcements Aimed At Getting the Vote Out on Tuesday," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired November 7, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>588</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion of Senatorial Election Races in Massachusetts and Virginia, Fashion and its Effect on Feminism, The New York Times and Lack of Credit Perceived By Democrats for Improvement in the Economy," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 19, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>589</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discusses Mario Cuomo's Election Strategy, Ross Perot's and Rudolph Guliani's '94 Endorsements, Texas Opinion Poll of Perot, and Research Study Showing Link Between Abortions and Breast-Cancer Risks," *Rush Limbaugh*, aired November 2 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>590</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Discussion on Electing Republicans to the House of Representatives; The Attempt to Ban Assault Weapons; And Alice Revlon's Memo That Suggests How to Deal With the Budget," *Rush Limbaugh*," produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 24, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

the House for a debate, much less a vote."<sup>591</sup> Listening to Limbaugh's description, Republican positions exuded appeal and common sense. For example, proposed Republican tax cuts simply represented a calculus, "that you will make better decisions with your money, spending it as you see fit, which will benefit the economy, than giving it to somebody like Tom Foley and letting him decide how to spend it. And that's what the decision we all face is."<sup>592</sup>

In many ways, 1994 represented the pinnacle of talk radio hosts serving a fairly traditional party leadership role. As Republicans had no responsibility to govern prior to 1994, talk radio focused on elevating them to power and opposing President Clinton's agenda. Crucially, hosts had minimal expectations for congressional Republicans, which fostered a complete synergy between the goals of hosts and elected Republicans that would not survive the transition to power. As Congressman Bob Walker (R-PA), a member of the Republican leadership, related, many hosts would disapprove of the compromises and the nuance that were necessary to govern.<sup>593</sup>

Nonetheless, talk radio hosts would continue to aid the party at election time, even when they were displeased with elected Republicans. For example, the 2006 election cycle presented substantial challenges for Republicans because of cyclical factors (the president's party traditionally fares poorly in his second midterm election),<sup>594</sup> issue based factors (including the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>591</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Look at the Upcoming Election and How Republicans Can Do Better," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 31 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>592</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Satirical Analysis of the Day's Political News," *Rush Limbaugh*, aired October 3, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>593</sup> Robert Walker, Interview With Author, October 10, 2013.

<sup>594</sup> The President's party typically struggles in midterm elections, especially during a President's second term. In five out of the six post-World War II midterm elections occurring during a President's second term, his party has lost a substantial number of seats; Charlie Cook, "Midterm Elections Could Be a Wave, But Who's Going to Drown," *National Journal Daily*, July 29, 2013, <a href="http://www.nationaljournal.com/columns/off-to-the-races/midterm-elections-could-be-a-wave-but-who-s-going-to-drown-20130729">http://www.nationaljournal.com/columns/off-to-the-races/midterm-elections-could-be-a-wave-but-who-s-going-to-drown-20130729</a>; Kyle Trygstad, "History Shows Midterm Elections a Hard Slog for President's Party," *Roll Call*, January 21, 2013, <a href="http://www.rollcall.com/news/bistory-shows-midterm-elections-a-hard-slog for presidents-party-220970-1.html">http://www.nationaljournal.com/news/bistory-shows-midterm-elections-a-hard-slog for presidents-party-220970-1.html</a>.

tumultuous Iraq War and the administration's oft criticized handling of Hurricane Katrina) and numerous scandals afflicting Congressional Republicans. Yet, the potential for a poor election cycle also stemmed from a factor that conservative talk radio was uniquely positioned to combat: anger among conservatives over policies enacted by (or not enacted by) President Bush and the Republican Congress, most especially on immigration and spending.

Talkers, many of whom were as disgruntled with Bush's policies as their listeners, continued to fulfill their leadership role. Sean Hannity headlined campaign events for, among others, Representative JD Hayworth (AZ), Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan gubernatorial candidates Mark Green, Ken Blackwell, and Dick Devos, Senator Rick Santorum (PA), and Maryland Senate Candidate Michael Steele, whose candidacy Hannity also promoted on the air. <sup>595</sup> He also accompanied Florida Senate candidate Katherine Harris on a bus tour, and held fundraisers for Santorum and Senator George Allen (VA). <sup>596</sup>

Hosts indispensably utilized adroit framing, priming, and inoculation to build a case for supporting Republicans electorally in spite of the party's foibles.<sup>597</sup> Michael Medved explained

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>595</sup> This list does not include candidates whose virtues Hannity extolled on the air, or who appeared on his program. Thus, it dramatically understates the number of candidates that Hannity aided during the 2006 election cycle. <sup>596</sup> David Callender, "Gov Race Brings Out the Stars," *The Capitol Times & Wisconsin State Journal*, November 4, 2006; Dave Pidgeon, "Santorum on Casey: He has no ideas," Lancaster New Era/Intelligencer Journal/Sunday News, October 30, 2006; Ann E. Marimow, "GOP Heavyweights Help With Steele's Fundraising," The Washington Post, October 25, 2006; "The 21st Century Version Of "This Is Your Life," The Hotline, September 29, 2006; "Overlooked," The Hotline, September 29, 2006; Michael D. Shear and Tim Craig, "Allen Calls Webb Aide, Apologizes For Remark," The Washington Post, August 24, 2006; Greg Pierce, "Inside Politics," The Washington Times, July 19, 2006; David Jackson and Richard Benedetto, "Bush Tries To Regain his Footing on Once-Rock-Solid Conservative Base," USA Today, June 2, 2006; "A New York State Of Mind," The Hotline, May 9, 2006; Anita Kumar, Adam C. Smith, and Bill Adair, "Harris Race is Grist For Rumor Mill In Capital," March 9, 2006; Howard Kurtz, "Radio Hosts Get Closer to The White House—If Only Physically," The Washington Post, October 25, 2006. <sup>597</sup> Jamieson and Cappella demonstrated how conservative talkers employed these techniques during presidential campaigns. But they minimally discussed congressional elections, which presented an even more fertile stage for this sort of leadership, and provided a fundamentally different situation because voters were far less informed about such elections and usually knew less about the respective candidates. These circumstances allowed talk radio to have a much greater impact; Kurtz, "Radio Hosts Get Closer to the White House."

that a House immigration bill called for building 700 miles of border fence. This bill demonstrated that a Republican led House would make progress on such issues, whereas a House led by Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi would make no such progress. Medved flatly rejected any notion that there were no differences between the parties, arguing that Republicans had lowered taxes every year since President Bush entered office, whereas Democrats increased taxes many times during the Clinton presidency and wanted to raise them again. Medved reminded listeners of some of President Bush's achievements, including bankruptcy reform. Even though he acknowledged that Republicans had not gone far enough in terms of reducing government, he explained that having Democrats in power would forestall any chance of achieving that goal. As Medved summarized, one party was capable of making progress, and the other was not. Thus, rather than focusing on Republican failings and prodding them to improve (for which there was certainly a time) during the critical campaign, Medved presented a case for reelecting Republicans, even while acknowledging his listeners' frustration. 598

Hosts also demagogued Democrats in an attempt to scare wavering listeners back into the fold. Medved reminded his listeners that Democrats care more about the "American Criminal Liars Union" than jailing terrorists. Hannity explained that John Conyors, who would chair the House Judiciary Committee if Democrats gained control of the House, was laying the groundwork to impeach President Bush. He later noted that a mere majority of the House would allow for impeaching Bush and cautioned, "And don't think these hate Bush people wouldn't do it. It's all at stake."<sup>599</sup> He tried to prevent his listeners from becoming complacent by noting that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>598</sup> Michael Medved, *The Michael Medved Show*, September 22, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>599</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, July 31, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

smart guys were predicting a Democratic takeover of Congress, appending the warning, "don't think it can't happen. It can happen."

As election day approached, conservative talkers switched to instilling listeners with a sufficient sense of hope and responsibility that they turned out to vote.<sup>601</sup> On the day before the election, Hannity hosted several vulnerable Republicans, and he informed his audience that there were five races within one to three points, which meant, "there is hope, that means there is opportunity. That means you have an unbelievable responsibility as you head into the voting booth tomorrow. If you were thinking about being lazy, tomorrow's not the day to do this. If you don't want to see Nancy Pelosi third in line for the presidency... Your destiny, your power comes tomorrow." A few minutes later, he exhorted, "there are more people in the collective talk radio audience, that if everybody voted, and was resolute in their defying of the news media and defying these liberal polls, you could have a significant impact on all of these races. A lot of these polls are unreliable; I don't know how these elections will turn out and frankly, neither do they."602 On the same day, Limbaugh argued that polls were simply a new way for the "drive by media" to report faux news and to help Democrats, who the media wanted to win in order to produce conflict. Thus, both Hannity and Limbaugh portrayed voting Republican as an opportunity to strike a blow against the hated mainstream media. Additionally, although he rarely hosted guests, Limbaugh welcomed both soon to be Republican Senate leader Mitch

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>600</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, August 4, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>601</sup> Hosts seemed to fulfill this function during both good and bad election cycles. Jamieson and Cappella offer an example of Limbaugh exhorting his listeners to vote on the eve of the 2002 midterm elections, which turned out quite well for Republicans. Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 123.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>602</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, November 6, 2006; The first thirty minutes of this show are available on the Library of Congress's recording of that day's Rush Limbaugh Program. See the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>...

McConnell<sup>603</sup> and President Bush's press secretary, Tony Snow. Limbaugh worked in tandem with McConnell to motivate listeners to vote. Later in the show, a caller reported receiving a robo-call from Limbaugh telling her what would happen if Democrats won and encouraging her to vote Republican.<sup>604</sup>

Thus, even as Republican behavior left hosts dissatisfied, they protected the party's interests. They devised frames to motivate their listeners to support Republicans, while deferring attempts to correct the party's wayward trajectory.

#### Republican Outreach to Talk Radio

By virtue of their popularity and their ability to rally listeners behind causes, hosts would have become Republican leaders regardless of how the Republican establishment reacted to talk radio's rise. Nonetheless, by 1995, Republican insiders embraced talk radio, which resulted in a symbiotic two-way relationship in which elected Republicans, candidates, aides, and the key party committees interacted with and cultivated talk radio hosts. The two way nature of this relationship benefitted both sides. Hosts gained access, including the ability to get prompt responses from Republican officials, high profile guests, and information on the Republican agenda. They did so without sacrificing their independence; indeed, after Republicans gained

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>603</sup> McConnell was the presumed heir apparent to Republican Leader Bill Frist, who was retiring.

<sup>604</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Program*, November 6, 2006; This recording is available through the Library of Congress Web Recording Program. It is only accessible on the computers at the Library of Congress. The index, last updated on March 24, 2015, is available at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.
605 Bawn et. al.write, "Although our account of party formation and change has emphasized the often-overlooked role of organized policy demanders, we do not claim that politicians play no role. But we see their role as managerial—facilitating efforts by policy demanding groups, often groups the politicians already represent." Managerial is not the right term to describe the way that politicians interacted with talk radio hosts, because it incorrectly implies that politicians had the ability to control hosts. Yet, this description captured the direction of power in the relationship between talk radio and politicians, in which the "outsider" hosts often dictated to the politicians, who offered aid, as opposed to the opposite relationship; Bawn et. al., "A Theory of Political Parties," 581.

control of Congress in 1994, and assumed the challenges of governing, hosts frequently criticized the results.

In spite of the difficulty sometimes caused by the hosts, however, they provided the party establishment with a channel through which to disseminate a message that was unfiltered by the mainstream media—something fairly unique at the time. The elected party leadership also used talk radio to communicate with their base, and to glean information about how their base felt on a given issue. This two-way relationship created a dichotomy; on the one hand hosts maintained staunch independence and reacted indignantly whenever anyone accused them of being partisan shills. They also never hesitated to criticize the party or its officials, nor were they always willing to accept suggestions and requests from elected Republicans. Yet, for all of this independence, on many days during the George W. Bush Administration, hosts might have received outreach from the House and Senate Republican Conferences, the White House, the RNC, and individual Republicans as well. Some hosts even took part in private small group meetings with President Bush.

Thus, while both parties generally benefited from their relationship, and depended upon one another, the relationship involved a certain degree of unease because the two sides often had divergent priorities, and over time, the hosts gained increasing amounts of power over the party's

agenda and the candidates that it nominated.<sup>606</sup> The party establishment often disagreed with hosts' choices and tactics for either strategic or policy reasons. Yet, hosts' influence with the party's grassroots made it politically perilous to openly object and fight back. Even trying to discipline members of Congress who worked in concert with talk radio against the elected leadership's priorities would likely have created more trouble for the establishment.

#### **Necessity, Mother of Invention**

Conservatives discovered the potential of talk radio before mainstream Republicans did. Initially, in fact, the potential benefits of talk radio initially escaped the elected Republican leadership. Some members were aware of and utilized local radio if they had a significant host in their district/state. For example, Senator John Danforth appeared on Bob Hardy's KMOX show at least once every few months.<sup>607</sup> Additionally, once talk radio began to make waves politically in the early 1990s, leading politicians addressed and interacted with the medium as needed. For example, longtime (1980-1994) House Republican Leader Bob Michel was not a fan of talk radio—the medium was not a part of his world. He used it sparingly, preferring to talk with his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>606</sup> If one combines the two main conceptions of political parties provided by scholars, the relationship between party functionaries and talk radio hosts makes sense. Both sides recognized that today's parties are coalitions. As John Aldrich explained, "a major political party is an institutionalized coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms, and procedures." In Aldrich's conception of parties, there were "more or less continual incentives for ambitious politicians to consider party organizations as means to achieve their goals." Politicians and political professionals needed activists, who, were "primarily policy motivated benefit seekers," to help mobilize voters. By contrast, Bawn, et. al, believed that "interest groups and activists form coalitions to nominate and elect politicians committed to their common program." These groups were the dominant forces in the coalition, instead of the politicians. Aldrich depicted a party in which politicians manipulated other members of their coalition to advance electoral goals, whereas the alternative conception posited that activists utilized politicians to achieve their policy goals. These two sets of goals can sometimes be incompatible. Elected Republicans sometimes had political goals that did not overlap with the policy and ideological goals of talk radio hosts and other activist party leaders. Even when politicians and activists agreed on policy objectives, their priorities and calculations might differ. As such, there was sometimes tension and contestation for control of the party, but generally activists and politicians worked cohesively to advance common goals; John Aldrich, Why Parties, 284, 286, & 291; Bawn et. al., "A Theory of Political Parties," 579. 607 John Danforth, Interview With Author, June 3, 2013.

constituents in Peoria.<sup>608</sup> As his former Chief of Staff Michael Johnson (until 1989) explained, Michel and his team did not appreciate the gravity or the reach of the medium, nor the changes it was making in conservative circles.<sup>609</sup> Nonetheless, according to Michel's Communications Director Missi Tessier, as the penetration of talk radio grew in Michel's final years in office, the medium developed into a secondary tool to communicate the House Republican Conference's message. Thus, whenever Tessier and her colleagues planned outreach surrounding an initiative, they included a talk radio component.<sup>610</sup>

Similarly, the George H.W. Bush White House did not fully understand and/or take advantage of the political potential of talk radio. As Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater acknowledged ruefully, "there was no sense of it [talk radio] as a tool... We didn't recognize what was happening."611 Barrie Tron, who headed the White House Media Relations operation, and Paul Luthringer, who served on Tron's staff, amplified this admission. Tron did not recall talk radio being included in the morning media clips distributed to key staff, or being discussed at the daily staff meetings. Luthringer noted that they did not track what talk radio was saying about President Bush, nor did they work to disseminate talking points to or arrange guests for hosts. More broadly, Dorrance Smith, who served as Assistant to President Bush for Media Affairs, remembered no radio specific strategy outside of the normal daily routine—press conferences had pooled radio coverage, etc.—and the weekly Saturday radio address. Smith perceived radio to be a medium that would be covered through the ripple effect of skillfully messaging on

<sup>608</sup> John Feehery, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>609</sup> Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey went even further, recalling that Michel put little store in newfangled ideas and loathed Rush Limbaugh; Michael S Johnson, Interview With Author, October 8, 2013; Dick Armey, Interview With Author, March 7, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>610</sup> Missi Tessier, Interview With Author, October 22, 2013.

<sup>611</sup> Balz and Brownstein, Storming the Gates, 172.

<sup>612</sup> Barrie Tron, Interview With Author, October 10, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>613</sup> Paul Luthringer, Interview With Author, October 29, 2013.

television.<sup>614</sup> For example, if the White House placed a guest on *This Week With David Brinkley*, the media affairs staff could reasonably believe that they had radio covered because the ABC news reports at the top of the hour on many stations would include soundbites from the interview.<sup>615</sup>

This illustrated that the Bush team understood radio as a news medium, with the focus on radio newscasts, not as a political medium, with the focus on talk programs. The Media Relations office arranged many interviews for administration surrogates on radio news programs. Additionally, Luthringer, who did most of the radio outreach for the Media Relations team, saw radio as a medium for circumventing the White House press corps and reaching citizens with a message. Frequently, he arranged for groups of radio personalities to come to the White House to interview President Bush in order to disseminate Bush's message and boost his popularity in a given locality. Luthringer typically included a combination of radio news anchors, disc jockeys, ethnic radio personalities, and on some occasions, talk radio hosts.

These appearances fit into a larger strategy of cultivating local and regional media, who would be more sympathetic to the President than the White House press corps. This strategy allowed the Media Relations team to target a message by market. Nonetheless, they failed to foresee the political potential offered by talk radio, which could have served as an ally for the administration. Only when Limbaugh endorsed Pat Buchanan over President Bush in the 1992 New Hampshire primary did talk radio capture the attention of Bush and his aides.<sup>617</sup> The President later invited Limbaugh to be an overnight guest at the White House.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>614</sup> This perspective fit with Smith's charge, which was to optimize use of all of the television tools available to the White House during the last two years of President Bush's term. He also oversaw all regional media.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>615</sup> Dorrance Smith, Interview With Author, October 23, 2013.

<sup>616</sup> Tron, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>617</sup> Balz and Brownstein, Storming the Gates, 172.

The 1992 Bush reelection campaign developed a more advanced talk radio outreach operation than Bush's 1988 campaign, and it engaged more with the medium than the White House did. Yet, the campaign also failed to fully take advantage of talk radio's political potential. In 1988, Luthringer ran the Bush campaign's outreach to radio, which consisted entirely of producing radio actualities (recorded audio clips sent to stations)<sup>618</sup> which Luthringer distributed to stations of all sorts. By contrast, in 1992, the campaign had a team devoted to distributing radio actualities, but this was only a component of the radio outreach.<sup>619</sup> In addition, campaign political director Mary Matalin, who was a Limbaugh fan, stayed in close touch with him (often previewing the campaign's talking points for him), and Campaign Communications Director Will Feltus tracked what Limbaugh said. President Bush and Vice President Quayle appeared on his program; more broadly, the Bush team booked surrogates on radio.<sup>620</sup>

Matalin recalled that 1992 was the first time that she saw the reach and power of talk radio. When many were giving up on the campaign, Matalin saw Limbaugh fighting on, making the points that the campaign should have been making, and doing so with much greater clarity and force. Although she believed that the campaign utilized talk radio as effectively as it could have at the time, even Matalin noted that there was no technical capacity to "leverage radio or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>618</sup> Actualities' content could vary, but typically, they consisted of some sort of soundbite from a politician. Indeed, these actualities included clips of speeches that then Vice President Bush gave, as well as endorsements from celebrities and well known politicians; Luthringer, Interview with Author.

<sup>619</sup> Will Feltus, Interview With Author, October 23, 2013.

<sup>620</sup> Elizabeth Long, E-mail Message to Author, April 18, 2013; Balz and Brownstein, *Storming the Gates*, 172; Mary Matalin and James Carville with Peter Knobler, *All's Fair: Love, War and Running for President* (New York: Touchstone and Random House, 1995), 284-285; "Quayle Invites Limbaugh to Be Debate Moderator," *The Associated Press*, October 2, 1992; "Candidate George Bush Visited Rush Limbaugh's Radio Show," *The St Louis Post Dispatch*, September 27, 1992; Michael Wines, "The 1992 Campaign: White House; Quayle Says Character Will Be Big Issue in Fall," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1992; Rush Limbaugh, "Quayle Campaign Appearance," *The Rush Limbaugh Program*, July 7, 1992, <a href="http://www.c-span.org/video/?27000-1/QuayleCampaignApp">http://www.c-span.org/video/?27000-1/QuayleCampaignApp</a>; Feltus, Interview With Author.

posit it as an element of a horizontal communication strategy and force magnifier."<sup>621</sup> More simply put, the Bush team did not have the ability and knowhow to fully harness the power of talk radio to the degree that later campaigns would.

Several interrelated factors contributed to the White House team, and to a lesser extent, the reelection campaign, failing to take full advantage of talk radio. Only in the second or third year of President Bush's term did talk radio, spurred by Limbaugh's burgeoning popularity, truly emerge as an entrant in the political arena. By this point, however, Bush's team had already established their communications strategy, which directed their focus to other media.

Additionally, talk radio's political potential was not clear to most people in politics at that point. Being ahead of the curve in understanding talk radio's political potential would have been especially difficult for the Media Relations team because White House staffers were so focused on executing their day-to-day responsibilities that they rarely got the opportunity to analyze, reflect, or consider the media environment. 622

Furthermore, the politicians initially attracted to talk radio gravitated to the medium because they needed an alternative means of communicating their message because they received minimal or inadequate mainstream media attention. This category included conservatives in the House of Representatives and Bush's 1992 opponent, Bill Clinton. Clinton's campaign began utilizing the medium in early primary states before Clinton began receiving sufficient mainstream media coverage, and before the campaign had the wherewithal to adequately disseminate a message through paid advertising. By contrast, as President, Bush received ample mainstream media attention.

<sup>621</sup> Elizabeth Long, E-mail Message to Author, April 18, 2013.

<sup>622</sup> Barrie Tron, Interview With Author.

Overall, the Bush team failed to perceive the political potential of the nascent medium because their media strategy focused elsewhere. They never needed to reevaluate this strategy, lacked time to consider the possibilities of talk radio, and failed to pay attention to what talk radio was saying.<sup>623</sup>

President Bush's personality also contributed to the posture of his White House and reelection campaign towards talk radio. Unlike then-Governor Clinton, the President did not enjoy doing interviews. He also guarded the dignity of the presidency by refusing to do media appearances that he considered to be beneath the stature of the office. Thus, while Clinton was answering questions about his underwear preferences on MTV, Bush refused Feltus' suggestion that he and Mrs. Bush appear on morning television with Regis Philbin and Kathy Lee Gifford.<sup>624</sup> Bush's campaign also had to convince White House schedulers that media appearances warranted a spot on the President's crowded schedule. Finally, a lack of technical capacity limited the Bush team. Only in 1990, did the media affairs team build a broadcast studio in the Old Executive Office Building, which allowed Bush to make remote appearances. Thus, even the ability to do broadcast appearances via satellite was cutting edge.<sup>625</sup>

Like Michel and Bush, Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole was slow to understand the power of talk radio and to embrace it. Before 1993, he appeared on some local talk radio shows and Larry King's national show.<sup>626</sup> Subsequently, Dole appeared regularly on Don Imus' show,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>623</sup> Tracking what talk radio said was far more difficult during the Bush presidency than it would be in the internet era when stations streamed their programming. Bush's aides would have been limited to listening to the talk programming available in Washington and might have struggled to even do that if they did not get good AM radio reception in the White House.

<sup>624</sup> Clinton's appearance on MTV spawned a debate in the White House over whether President Bush should appear on the network. Eventually Bush's advisers decided that he would not be comfortable in such a venue; Smith, Interview With Author; Feltus, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>625</sup> Barrie Tron, Interview With Author.

<sup>626</sup> Walt Riker, Interview With Author, November 14, 2013.

and occasionally appeared with other talk radio hosts, including Limbaugh, Roger Hedgecock, and Bob Grant. Pet, as leader, Dole focused on media that were accessible to him, but not available to less prominent senators. Thus, at one point Dole had the record for most appearances on CNN's *Larry King Live* and NBC's *Meet the Press*. According to his Press Secretary Clarkson Hine, one year Dole appeared on a Sunday morning television program sixty-nine percent of the time. While Hine sent information to talk radio hosts, talk radio received no special priority over other media. Overall, Dole was more of a creature of establishment media than an insurgent medium like talk radio. Because of the mainstream media attention that he received, Dole did not need talk radio to get his message out.

As the experiences of Bush, Michel, and Dole revealed, although talk radio developed into a conservative medium, it was inherently the medium of the neglected outsider.

Conservatives harnessed the power of the medium simply because they were the people most ignored by the political and media establishment at the time that talk radio was emerging. By contrast, those who were slower to understand the medium's potential received substantial mainstream press coverage. Additionally, there may have been a generation gap at work. Bush, Dole, and Michel were all World War II veterans born in 1923 or 1924. All three first entered the electoral arena before the mid-1960s. By contrast, the mid-1990s House Republican leaders who heavily utilized talk radio were all children of the 1940s and 1950s, and all entered electoral office in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

Dole's 1996 presidential campaign recognized that talk radio offered the ability to inform, energize, and mobilize the conservative base.<sup>628</sup> Yet, paradoxically, the campaign also reflected

<sup>627</sup> Clarkson Hine, Interview With Author, November 23, 2013; Bob Grant, *The Bob Grant Show*, WABC Radio, April 8, 1994, <a href="http://www.c-span.org/video/?55911-1/BobGr">http://www.c-span.org/video/?55911-1/BobGr</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>628</sup> Andrew Weinstein, Interview With Author, June 3, 2013.

Dole's lack of enthusiasm for the medium.<sup>629</sup> Early in the Republican primary, the campaign employed talk radio in key states to reassure the base, as many conservatives had misgivings about whether the pragmatic Dole's conservative bona fides. The campaign understood that base voters often most respected conservative hosts. The campaign also issued a daily blast fax to hosts with information, news, and polling. Dole's staff tried to find local surrogates for hosts looking for guests, but prioritized three to five major national hosts, including Limbaugh and Michael Reagan. These hosts had a hotline that they could call when they needed something from the campaign. The campaign also had a radio actuality line to provide audio of Dole's speeches to stations.<sup>630</sup> Nonetheless, hosts expressed frustration over how little of the candidate's time they received. The campaign's radio surrogates lacked star power, and Dole himself did relatively little talk radio. Until June 1996, Dole's role as Senate Majority Leader contributed to his lack of radio appearances. He did more talk radio as the campaign progressed, but it was never a communications priority for Dole.

#### The House

In contrast to the trio of Republican leaders, House conservatives in the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS) and the Republican Study Committee (RSC) quickly grasped the potential benefits of talk radio. Bob Walker, one of the founders of the COS, began appearing on talk radio in the late 1970s in response to requests from hosts. When Walker, Vin Weber (MN), and Newt Gingrich founded the COS in 1984, they understood that they constituted a rump faction in Congress, whose singular agenda did not always mesh with their leadership's goals. Talk radio provided one of several methods to get their message to activists beyond the

<sup>629 &</sup>quot;Politics-Bob Who," *National Journal*, April 27, 1996, <a href="http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/politics-bob-who--19960427?mrefid=site\_search">http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/politics-bob-who--19960427?mrefid=site\_search</a>.

<sup>630</sup> Andrew Weinstein, Interview With Author.

Washington bubble. It afforded one of their few hopes for media coverage. As backbench members of the typically irrelevant House minority, they had little influence, and thus the mainstream media had minimal interest in covering them. When Walker joined the leadership in 1989 as Chief Deputy Whip, he began pushing leadership to reach out more to talk radio.<sup>631</sup>

Similarly, Paul Morrell, the press secretary to Representative Bob Dornan (R-CA), first noticed talk radio because hosts kept requesting interviews with his loquacious and colorful boss, who was a former media personality. Morrell realized that talk radio presented an opportunity to build momentum behind an issue. Most of the hosts with whom he dealt were conservative, which gave him the idea of building a network of talk shows. Morrell worked with other staffers to compile a master list of talk radio hosts in each congressional district. This list became the foundation of the Talk Right initiative. This initiative produced one page documents or member speeches explaining smaller issues that members worked on, but which the mainstream media ignored. The RSC blast faxed these documents out to radio hosts along with a list of members who had agreed to make radio appearances. The members loved the attention that they got from the initiative. Subsequently, it focused primarily on the RSC's call for bold changes in the trajectory of government spending.<sup>632</sup> Conservative staffers saw talk radio as a way to get their bosses' message out by going around the mainstream media.<sup>633</sup>

Two major changes brought talk radio to the forefront of the House Republican communications strategy: first, Michel retired, leaving Gingrich, Dick Armey, and Tom DeLay, three talk radio fans who understood its potential, as the top Republican leaders. After Michel announced his retirement, Armey and Gingrich assumed control of the Republican battle plan for

<sup>631</sup> Walker, Interview With Author.

<sup>632</sup> Bill Himpler, Interview With Author, October 23, 2012.

<sup>633</sup> Himpler, Interview With Author; Gillespie, Interview With Author.

the 1994 elections and beyond. Their strategy included utilizing talk radio on a consistent basis to help galvanize a vocal and active pro-Republican part of electorate at a time when almost no one believed that Republicans could win control of the House.<sup>634</sup> If they needed any further motivation to embrace talk radio, the 1994 election results provided it. Many people believed that Republicans only captured control of the House for the first time in forty years because of Limbaugh and talk radio.<sup>635</sup> The day after the election, Speaker-elect Gingrich called Limbaugh to thank him for "how much you helped us overcome the elite media bias and how much, just by hammering home the truth about issues, you helped arm I think literally millions of people across the country with the facts that let them argue in October and November so successfully."<sup>636</sup>

Thus, after the election, the RSC's tactics became the Republican caucus' tactics. The conference hired Chad Kolton to helm an outreach operation that produced a one page daily tip sheet for talk radio hosts. When hosts had questions about something in the tip sheet, Kolton procured answers. Kolton's daily contact with hosts and producers provided a feedback loop, which allowed the leadership to avoid being surprised by anything percolating on talk radio. Additionally, Kolton booked House Republicans as radio guests, refusing no requests from any station, big or small.

634 Schweers, Interview With Author; Armey, Interview With Author; Walker, Interview With Author.

<sup>635</sup> Regardless of whether or not talk radio's impact on the 1994 elections could be proven or quantified, most elected Republicans and their staffers perceived that talk radio played an essential role in their victory. This belief animated all of their future outreach towards talk radio. When describing why Republican members, including the leadership, willingly participated in the Conference's outreach to talk radio, Kyle Downey, who subsequently ran the outreach program, said that, "it all went back to '94. Talk Radio was such a factor in taking back the majority." Howard Kurtz, "The Talkmeisters; Saying All of the Right Things," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 1995; Armey, Interview With Author; "Rush Limbaugh's America," PBS Frontline, 1995.

<sup>636</sup> This snippet came from a Paley Center recording entitled "Rush Limbaugh highlights," catalog number, 12568R, <a href="http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22rush+limbaugh%22&f=all&c=all&advanced=1&p=1&item=RB:12568">http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22rush+limbaugh%22&f=all&c=all&advanced=1&p=1&item=RB:12568</a>, accessed at the Paley Center's New York Branch.

Talk radio provided Republicans with a way to reach their constituents, and it allowed the leadership to manufacture attention on issues as the House focused on them. Additionally, beginning with the first House talk radio day, which commemorated the first one hundred days of the 104th Congress, 637 Kolton organized talk radio days several times per year centered around a major issue on which the leadership wanted to focus attention. Initially, Kolton faced some reticence from members because the operation was new, he was twenty-one years old, and press secretaries foresaw far more risk than benefit to putting their bosses on radio shows outside of their district or state. Yet, Republican members quickly warmed to it.

Kolton's operation supported the Republican agenda. Majority Leader Armey had learned early in his career that to advance large and controversial legislation, one had to build support both within and outside of Congress. Republican members could more easily take difficult votes because they knew that hosts would build support for their positions back home. The few conservative nationally syndicated shows during the period were an especially useful tool for echoing a message back to Republican members, as well as to their constituents. The outreach operation also built support for freshman members who sat in marginal districts and faced onslaughts from Democratic allies who aimed to regain the majority in 1996.

Speaker Gingrich regularly appeared nationally with Limbaugh and Michael Reagan.

Gingrich immensely enjoyed engaging with hosts and talking with callers, which offered him a chance to convert people to his way of thinking. Talk radio also allowed him to circumvent newspapers, many of which were hostile, and to discuss issues in greater depth. Whereas, he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>637</sup> The Republican caucus also invited talk radio hosts to broadcast from the Capitol during the week in which they took control of the House; Phil Kuntz and Jackie Calmes, "With Some Pomp and Circumstance, Gingrich Assumes Role as House Speaker," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1995; Howard Kurtz, "The Talkmeisters."

<sup>638</sup> Dick Armey, Interview With Author, March 7, 2013.

<sup>639</sup> Andrew Weinstein, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>640</sup> Bill Paxon, Interview With Author.

might fight for a line or two in the *Washington Post* each day, getting some of his time thrilled regional radio hosts. Many times, he would call Limbaugh unsolicited if he or a member of his staff heard Limbaugh making points that they felt needed to be addressed.<sup>641</sup>

When Dennis Hastert succeeded Gingrich as Speaker in 1999, he preferred working in the back room to achieve legislation. He left talk radio primarily to other members of the leadership, including Tom DeLay and JC Watts. Yet, Hastert appeared on local talk radio when he traveled and held events with congressmen. While a host might not cover the local congressman's fish fry, he/she happily interviewed Hastert.<sup>642</sup>

Once Kolton left in 1998, the talk radio outreach operation adapted under Chris Paulitz, Kyle Downey, Shawn Dhar, and subsequently others, but it remained robust. These outreach directors interacted daily with producers and hosts, both fielding requests and pitching topics and guests to hosts. When Downey ran the program, he worked to pair members with hosts based on issue expertise or region. Where it was legally possible, he coordinated with the RNC talk radio program run by Trey Bohn. Dhar focused on national media, and he sent hosts and producers alerts when big issues or big votes were pending. For the biggest issues, the operation still employed radio rows<sup>643</sup> several times a year. By and large, members bought into the program and willingly chatted with talk radio hosts. Over time, technological advancements changed the mechanics of the program. By 2007, for example, the House conference possessed the technical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>641</sup> Andrew Weinstein, Interview With Author; Christina Martin, Interview With Author, Kevin Schweers, Interview With Author; Lauren Maddox, Interview With Author; Leigh Ann Pusey, Interview With Author, December 10, 2013. Rachel Robinson, Interview With Author, January 13, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>642</sup> Mike Stokke, Interview With Author, July 2, 2014; J. Dennis Hastert, Interview With Author, June 11, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>643</sup> Radio rows involved hosts from all over the country broadcasting from Washington where staffers lined up a stream of high profile guests for them.

capability to hold virtual radio rows, in which hosts did not need to come to Washington to be fed a steady stream of high profile guests.<sup>644</sup>

Individual House members also eagerly cultivated local hosts in their districts and states. These hosts offered members a chance to discuss locally important issues with a large number of constituents. Mark Souder even co-hosted his own program during his first years in Congress.<sup>645</sup> Additionally, large stations in their state afforded ambitious Congressmen, such as Adam Putnam (R-FL) and Mark Foley (R-FL), an opportunity to raise their profile in advance of running statewide.<sup>646</sup> Talk radio also provided an affordable means of disseminating a message in expensive media markets. New Jersey fell in the expensive and busy Philadelphia and New York media markets. Thus, when Sean Spicer worked for New Jersey congressmen, local radio stations offered one of the best options for getting a message out.<sup>647</sup>

According to Majority Leader Armey, for the few very highly entrepreneurial members, talk radio also presented an opportunity to build a coalition outside of the House to support a pet bill or cause, which helped to build support within the institution.<sup>648</sup> For example, in 1995, freshman Congressman Van Hilleary (R-TN) authored an amendment to a term limits bill drafted by veteran Republican Bill McCollum (FL) (Hilleary's amendment set national term limits, but also allowed states to have stricter limits of their own). The Republican leadership either opposed Hilleary's amendment, or in the case of Gingrich and Armey, did not prioritize the issue or provide him with support. Instead, Hilleary spent weeks appearing on talk radio programs in an

<sup>644</sup> Wendy Wang, "Radio Rows Give Talk Hosts Front Line Access and Perspective," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 172 (October 2006): 28-29; Ellen Ratner, "Radio Rows Continue to Inspire Synergy and Creativity," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 181 (September 2007): 40-41; Ellen Ratner," Republicans Pull Off a *Virtual* Radio Row for Hosts and Bloggers," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 183 (November 2007): 38-39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>645</sup> Souder, E-mail Message to Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>646</sup> Chris Paulitz, Interview With Author, January 9, 1993.

<sup>647</sup> Sean Spicer, Interview With Author, October 1, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>648</sup> Armey, Interview With Author.

attempt to build popular support to pressure his peers into supporting his amendment and the overall term limits effort.<sup>649</sup> Indeed, as Congressman Walker explained, talk radio, and subsequently the internet, have provided even the most junior members of Congress with their own communications stream that does not depend on any leadership input.<sup>650</sup> In fact, challenging leadership generated exactly the sort of outsider, controversial, combative content that best suited talk radio.

#### The Senate

Senators also utilized talk radio, albeit in a less organized fashioned than House Republicans did. They had less of a conference wide booking operation, primarily because senators did not have to work as hard as congressmen to disseminate their message. Nonetheless, whenever the Republican Conference organized an issue campaign between 2000-2004, they tried to schedule a radio row and disseminated talking points to talk radio hosts.<sup>651</sup> Overall, however, the caucus radio operation focused more on providing technical expertise.<sup>652</sup> As such, the Republican conference had a radio studio, which senators used to talk to stations in their states, to distribute radio actualities to stations, and to host their own radio shows.<sup>653</sup>

A combination of advanced age, long service (as late as 2002 the Senate caucus included veteran Senators Strom Thurmond and Jesse Helms), and senators' perception of the risks and benefits of talk radio made them more reticent to engage with the new medium than their House counterparts. In many ways, senators considered talk radio to be, paradoxically, too big and too small. Senators generally had a larger profile than House members. As such, many refused to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>649</sup> Linda Killian, *The Freshmen*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 32-62

<sup>650</sup> Robert Walker, Interview With Author.

<sup>651</sup> Drew Cantor, Interview With Author, August 23, 2014.

<sup>652</sup> Kyle Downey, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>653</sup> Dave Hodgden, Interview with Author, October 23, 2013; Clarkson Hine, Interview With Author, November 25, 2013.

appear on radio programs outside of their states, with the exception of the largest national shows, because they perceived risk and no potential benefit.<sup>654</sup> Yet, as Senator Bob Bennett (R-UT) (a talk radio regular) noted, the Senate was also the last place where people caught on to the benefit of talk radio because the medium tended to be local, and senators focused statewide.<sup>655</sup>

Nonetheless, talk radio allowed senators not turned off by the need to go media market by media market to be a presence throughout their states in spite of time limitations.<sup>656</sup> Senator Jon Kyl had a good relationship with many local hosts, especially those on KFYI in Phoenix. When he had time, Kyl appeared on one of their shows. Talk radio provided Kyl with an outlet to discuss important issues with a generally supportive audience that needed background and information on how issues were playing out in Washington.<sup>657</sup> Other senators utilized talk radio to explain to constituents how the national issues they were debating in Washington affected, for example, Zanesville, Ohio.<sup>658</sup> Kevin Schweers recalled that when he worked for Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX), she even did interviews with hosts who disagreed with her on the issues, though Hutchinson handled those interviews delicately.<sup>659</sup>

Additionally, Trent Lott's communications program when he served as Senate Republican Leader between 1996 and 2002 included a major talk radio component. Whenever Lott received a request to appear with a host, such as Sean Hannity, he did so gladly.<sup>660</sup> Dating back to his earliest days in office, Lott grasped that radio offered him the opportunity to communicate with constituents driving to work in the shipyards. After he won his Senate seat, he regularly appeared

<sup>654</sup> Kyle Downey, Interview With Author.

<sup>655</sup> Robert Bennett, Interview with Author, January 4, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>656</sup> Senators, especially those from large states, faced difficulties in appearing frequently throughout the state because they were generally in Washington from Monday night until Thursday night.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>657</sup> Jon Kyl, Interview With Author, October 15, 2015.

<sup>658</sup> Chris Paulitz, Interview With Author, January 9, 2013.

<sup>659</sup> Kevin Schweers, Interview With Author, January 25, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>660</sup> Trent Lott, Interview With Author, September 16, 2013.

on the Mississippi based Radio News Network, sometimes almost weekly, and on shows on an Alabama station that reached his constituents. Doing so allowed him to get his message out, and to get a feel for what his constituents thought when he took phone calls. Nationally, Lott found talk radio to be useful for creating interest in welfare reform and balancing the budget as he negotiated with President Clinton. Talk radio motivated listeners to communicate their support for Republican positions to their representatives and senators, which provided leverage in the negotiations. <sup>661</sup>

#### **RNC**

Beginning in 1992, the RNC also had a talk radio outreach operation that covered both the quadrennial nominating convention and issue campaigns. Before the 1992 Republican Convention, eight broadcasters approached Scott Hogenson about broadcasting live from the convention; an excited Hogenson made plans to accommodate them. The one hundred and fifty shows broadcasting live from the Republican convention in 1996 demonstrated the subsequent explosion of talk radio. In addition to arranging broadcasts from the convention, the RNC program endeavored to affect pending legislation and to win elections. Beginning in 1993, Hogenson faxed daily segment ideas to producers, hosts, and bookers. He offered hosts with everything necessary to produce a segment, including ideas for guests and documents providing attribution for stories. Although, legally, the RNC could not expressly advocate for or against a candidate or legislation, it could turn talk radio into a platform for disseminating ideas and give hosts the information to offer explicit advocacy on their own.662

<sup>661</sup> Trent Lott, Interview With Author, September 16, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>662</sup> Scott Hogenson, Interview With Author, September 7, 2012.

In 2000, Chris Paulitz incorporated a daily tip sheet<sup>663</sup> designed to generate callers into the RNC program. Each day the RNC staff wrote and distributed scripts to hosts prepared solely for the medium. These scripts included more incendiary charges and language than traditional press releases. Some hosts read the scripts on the air, others adapted the ideas to fit their own purposes and style. Furthermore, in advance of the 2000 campaign, Mark Pfeifle, who worked with Paulitz, produced a CD of Vice President Gore's snafus and misstatements and distributed it to radio shows. The RNC also had a talk radio hotline that could produce guests for a host in as little as five minutes. The operation aggressively and proactively reached out to hosts, and Pfiefle and Paulitz designed this outreach specifically to fit hosts' needs. They left the positive messaging to the Bush campaign, endeavoring instead to disseminate negative information about Gore. The RNC operation ceded no territory to Democrats. They reached out to urban radio, liberal radio, and National Public Radio, understanding that left leaning outlets had time to fill, and conflict made for good radio.<sup>664</sup>

After President Bush's victory, the RNC team shifted its focus to the 2002 Congressional elections. Trey Bohn set up a map of battleground districts and states overlaid with key radio stations. The RNC team tried to develop relationships with personnel at those stations and at stations in places where Republicans should be prospering, but were, for some reason, underperforming. The RNC program remained strong throughout the Bush Administration, changing primarily because of technology, which increased its sophistication. Brian Walton who served at the RNC in 2001 and 2002, and again in 2007, remarked how far the program advanced between his two stints. By later in the decade, the RNC could listen live to even the smallest stations using the internet. Similarly, Scott Hogenson, who returned to the RNC to run the radio

663 This project was labeled the "Light Up the Phones" campaign.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>664</sup> Mark Pfeifle, Interview With Author, January 16, 2013; Chris Paulitz, Interview With Author

row at the 2004 convention, noted how much easier technology made the job. In 2004, rather than using radio actuality phone lines (hosts called these lines to access snippets of audio) to feed audio to stations and blast faxes to communicate with hosts, Hoganson could instead send hosts and producers emails with .WAV audio files embedded.<sup>665</sup>

#### George W. Bush Campaigns and White House

Initially, Susan Phalen ran a small talk radio operation for the 2000 Bush campaign, which existed to book then Governor Bush on radio. With the RNC serving as a hatchet man, the campaign focused on introducing Bush to the public in a way that would be impossible through four minute television interviews. The operation sought to demonstrate Bush's character and personality, and to explain why he was running to be president. Bush furthered this mission by giving a speech and circulating for interviews at the annual talk radio convention early in the campaign. Over time, the operation expanded to include booking surrogates to testify to Bush's personality, qualifications, and passion for the job. She booked Bush on media in a city in advance of a speech in order to generate attention and crowds. Phalen maintained fairly tight control of Bush's radio appearances, which occurred either on conservative outlets, or with ground rules under which producers knew that trying to ambush Bush would harm the show's standing with the campaign. <sup>666</sup>

Radio director Brian Walton launched the Bush re-election campaign's talk radio operation in August 2003, which was far earlier than previous campaigns had begun doing radio appearances. Initially he focused on local radio and some national conservative programs. The surrogates who Walton booked for interviews could address thorny and locally important issues

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>665</sup> Trey Bohn, Interview with Author, October 31, 2012; Brian Walton, Interview With Author, February 20, 2013; Hogenson, Interview With Author.

<sup>666</sup> Susan Phalen, Interview With Author, April 1, 2013.

on the campaign's terms,<sup>667</sup> while remaining above the national fray during the Democratic primary. Talk radio allowed the campaign to message and motivate its supporters while much of the media focused on the Democratic primary. During this period, the operation built relationships with key hosts.<sup>668</sup> Phil Valentine, a conservative host in Nashville, summarized the mutually beneficial nature of this outreach, "They wanted to get their voice out, and I got to interview Karl Rove and Andy Card'... 'It shows people like me that we're on the radar screen and they care about us. That makes a big difference." <sup>669</sup>

As the campaign grew, Walton worked to advance a daily message and booked surrogates working in concert with the campaign's five regional press secretaries.<sup>670</sup> Kevin Madden, one of those regional spokesmen, sometimes spent thirteen hours a day appearing on talk radio. Often, many of the state press secretaries working under Madden spent their days aggressively pitching material and guests to local talk radio. The campaign especially relied on talk radio to get its message out in markets which had hostile print and television reporters.<sup>671</sup>

Once in the White House, Bush's team ran a robust radio booking and outreach operation designed to advance the President's policy agenda. President Bush did not enjoy doing radio interviews, and thus did relatively few once he entered the White House.<sup>672</sup> By contrast, Vice President Dick Cheney frequently appeared on talk radio, as his counselor, Mary Matalin, understood the importance of radio, having spent time as a host herself. When Bush's policies

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>667</sup> Hosts tended to ask campaign officials gentle questions, which allowed the campaign to address potentially troublesome issues, such as lifting steel tariffs, which was not popular in industrial areas, on its own terms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>668</sup> Brian Walton, Interview With Author, February 20, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>669</sup> Jim Rutenberg, "Bush's Campaign Finds Outlet on Local Radio," *The New York Times*, December 29, 2003.

<sup>670</sup> Walton, Interview With Author.

<sup>671</sup> Kevin Madden, Interview with Author, August 26, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>672</sup> Bush's dislike for doing radio interviews also limited how often Phalen put him on the air during the 2000 campaign.

left hosts disgruntled, the White House often dispatched the Vice President, who was popular with conservatives, to talk radio.<sup>673</sup>

The interaction between the Bush team and talk radio hosts underscored the mutually beneficial nature of the relationship between talk radio and Republican politicians. The Bush team sought to make life as convenient as possible for hosts. During his time as Radio Director, Trey Bohn tried to fulfill every request for a guest that he received. He also worked hard to match guests to a host's interests, and each guest received such detailed preparations that he/she might be reminded not to say good morning to a host whose program aired on tape delayed in many markets. However, when Taylor Gross, and later Bohn, booked guests on radio, they also typically established ground rules designed to help the White House fulfill its goals, especially for a host looking to book Vice President Cheney or President Bush. After taking part in a morning meeting to determine the White House's message of the day, Gross and Bohn then undertook to interest hosts in discussing that topic. They employed facts and information tailored to each host's state. On big issues, they disseminated fact sheets, and aggressively reached out to define and clarify issues for hosts.<sup>674</sup>

If national security dominated the day's news, Bohn (after he succeeded Gross in 2003), would request twenty minutes with National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice to get information on the issue that he would then disseminate to hosts. Alternatively, if an attack by Senator Harry Reid, the Democratic Whip,<sup>675</sup> warranted a reply, Bohn would put someone on with Heidi Harris and Alan Stock, key radio hosts in Reid's home state of Nevada. As stations

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>673</sup> See Peter Baker, Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 421 & 495.

<sup>674</sup> Bohn, Interview With Author; Taylor Gross, Interview With Author, March 13, 2013.

<sup>675</sup> Reid ascended to become Senate Democratic Leader in 2005.

began streaming their shows online, Bohn started tracking key shows and reported to his superiors about what hosts discussed.

The radio operation was part of a larger focus on regional and local press.<sup>676</sup> Local and regional press tended to be more favorable to the White House both because they were more likely to agree ideologically with President Bush, but also because local press appreciated getting a guest from the administration more than the White House press corps, which dealt with the administration daily. Gross and Bohn both employed outside of the box methodology to take advantage of this tendency. When Gross plotted the first White House radio day, a broader version of the 1993 radio event that President Clinton's team had held to promote their healthcare plan, he invited John Boy and Billy, classic rock disc jockeys from North Carolina.

In September 2006, conservative consternation about President Bush's spending and immigration policies left the White House team concerned that hosts might not rally voters to the Republican side in the midterm elections.<sup>677</sup> In response, President Bush invited hosts Sean Hannity, Michael Medved, Laura Ingraham, Mike Gallagher, and Neal Boortz (who required an emergency trip to Men's Warehouse after receiving the invitation while on vacation) to the White House for a private, off the record meeting. Bush presented his case to the hosts, which they could convey to his base in general terms. This meeting gave the hosts an opportunity to see Bush at his best; in public, Bush could be cautious because every word would be beamed around the world. In private, however, he was highly engaging and candid.<sup>678</sup> During the ninety minute session, Bush impressed and reassured the hosts. Gallagher left fascinated at how passionate,

<sup>676</sup> In this regard, the Bush White House was like both the Clinton and George H.W. Bush White Houses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>677</sup> Kurtz, "Radio Hosts Get Closer to the White House;" Jim Rutenberg, "As Talk Radio Wavers, Bush Moves to Firm Up Support, *The New York Times*, October 17, 2006.

Peter Baker made a similar observation in *Days of Fire*, writing "WHEN THE RED LIGHT on the camera came on that night, January 10, Bush as he often did, looked uncomfortable, stiff, and small, 'wound tightly,' as J.D. Crouch put it, not the robust figure his advisers saw in private;" Baker, *Days of Fire*, 525.

engaged, warm, and funny the President was in the relaxed setting. Boortz departed with the conviction that the deeply faithful Bush truly believed that anyone who believed in God would have a burning desire to be free. He also came away understanding that Bush was "absolutely convinced" that the United States would prevail in Iraq and in the War on Terrorism. Both hosts shared these convictions with their listeners. Bush also used the opportunity to find out how the hosts' listeners felt about key issues.<sup>679</sup>

The success of this meeting, and encouragement provided by Bush's new counselor Ed Gillespie (who joined the White House in 2007), led to additional similar meetings. The White House team selected hosts for each meeting because they cared particularly about the specific issues that the President wished to discuss, and because they had a large reach. A 2007 meeting with ten hosts, for example, focused on foreign policy.<sup>680</sup>

#### Rush

In terms of outreach, Rush Limbaugh, by nature of his unmatched stature in talk radio, was, as Kyle Downey termed it, "the Super Bowl, the Holy Grail, he was the Beatles. He was in his own little category." Early in his rise, he spoke frequently with Gingrich (who had enough of a relationship with Limbaugh to vacation with him during one holiday weekend), and the Republican leadership made a real effort to cultivate and communicate with him.<sup>681</sup> Limbaugh, however, understood that he could not become too closely associated with elected Republicans because his independence was a major part of his appeal to listeners. Additionally, he understood that the necessities of governing might lead elected Republicans to adopt stances with which he

<sup>679</sup> Mike Gallagher, "My Meeting With President Bush," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 172 (October 2006): 15-16; Boortz, "Today's Nuze, September 18. 2006," <a href="http://www.wsbradio.com/weblogs/nealz-nuze/2006/sep/18/2006-09-18/">http://www.wsbradio.com/weblogs/nealz-nuze/2006/sep/18/2006-09-18/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>680</sup> Lars Larson, "Orators in the Oval Office," Talkers Magazine, no. 181 (September 2007): 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>681</sup> John King, "Gingrich Again Considers Running for President; House speaker Will - Spend Four Days in Key State of New Hampshire Next Week," *The Austin American Statesman*, June 3, 1995.

and his listeners would disagree, and for which he did wish to be tarred.<sup>682</sup> As such, John Feehery felt like the Republican leaders for whom he worked did not invest much time in cultivating Limbaugh, because "he does his own thing." Reflecting this distance, Kyle Downey considered getting "Rush to side in or comment on something, that was winning the Super Bowl." The Bush White House's treatment of Limbaugh's twentieth anniversary on the national airwaves demonstrated his importance to Republican politicians. Trey Bohn commemorated this 2008 milestone by arranging a surprise, on-air, congratulatory phone call from President Bush, his father, and his brother, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush.<sup>683</sup>

#### **Everyone Wins**

Two cases in which talk radio served as an information source and a platform for Republican officials, while also highlighting the host's importance and access to high level Republicans, epitomized the two-way nature of the relationship between talk radio and Republican officials. In 1994, Limbaugh fielded a call from two paratroopers who reported that, because of budget cuts, the Army had assigned only fifteen rounds of ammunition to some of the soldiers from their division being deployed to Haiti. Senator Hank Brown (R-CO) heard these calls, and he inquired with the Pentagon about the veracity of the information, and the rationale behind the policy. Brown and Senator Don Nickles (R-OK) also wrote to President Clinton

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>682</sup> Indeed, when the 104th Congress convened, and hosts descended on the Capitol to celebrate the Republican takeover of the House, Limbaugh went on vacation to create distance between himself and the newly empowered Republicans; ""Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series, The First Annual Radio Festival: Rush Limbaugh and the Talk Radio Revolution," October 24, 1995, Catalog number T:40932, accessed at the Paley Center's New York branch.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>683</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "The Bush Family Calls Rush," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, July 31, 2008, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/the">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/08/01/the</a> bush family calls rush2.

demanding that the policy be reversed. Brown then appeared on Limbaugh's television show to discuss his efforts to rectify the situation.<sup>684</sup>

In the second case, in 1997, Speaker Gingrich was listening to Limbaugh as he drove South on Interstate 95 to visit his daughter. Limbaugh read a memo from Steve Forbes about an IRS attempt to extend the Medicare payroll levy to business partnerships via regulation. Gingrich pulled over, checked with his staff and staff for the House Ways and Means Committee, who he instructed to scuttle the proposed regulation (which had been issued months earlier) and, for the second time that week, called Limbaugh to assure him that he would take care of the problem. For both Brown and Gingrich, Limbaugh provided information that they otherwise might not have gotten, a platform from which to communicate with their base, and an opportunity to demonstrate the ability to act quickly upon their base's concerns. Limbaugh, in turn, reaped the benefit of appearing well-connected and politically powerful, as well as from having his program break news. Thus, the interaction between talk radio and Republicans could be initiated from either side and proved to be mutually beneficial.

Overall, the efforts by the RNC, Congressional Republicans, and President Bush's White House and campaigns gave talk radio hosts the tools that they needed to help advance the Republican agenda and to spin things in a beneficial manners for Republicans. It also allowed for Republican staffers to sense dissent and address it by dispatching prominent guests to a show, which, even when the host disagreed, would at least get their perspective on the air. Finally, talk radio provided these staffers with a sense about what issues the listeners and callers who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>684</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Insufficient Ammunition for US Military Going to Haiti, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired September 24, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>685</sup> Deroy Murdock, "A Republican Leader," *The Washington Times*, April 9, 1997; Tara Meyer, "Gingrich Says He Still Wants a Tax Cut This Year," *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 5, 1997; Greg Hitt, "Gingrich Vows To Kill New Rule Taxing Business Partnerships," *Dow Jones News Services*, April 3, 1997.

populated their base out beyond the Washington bubble cared. Hosts benefitted because outreach made their job easier. Having access to information and high level guests also improved their stature with listeners, and, over time, gave them a greater voice within the party. Yet, they never sacrificed their independence, or their ability or willingness to ignore Republican outreach.

#### **Independent and Feared Leadership**

Hosts subordinated their party loyalty to their fealty to their beliefs, their allegiance to their listeners, and their focus on producing good radio. Especially when Republicans controlled the White House and/or either house of Congress, hosts refused to accept the nuance required by governing. They demanded all or nothing, and failed to appreciate that any legislation that advanced policy in a conservative direction, especially during divided government, constituted a win. As Congressman Walker observed, the stock and trade of radio hosts was communicating a sharp, unambiguous message, and part of hosts' job was to entertain listeners. Nuance, however, was not particularly entertaining. 686 Thus, Republican priorities often diverged from hosts' priorities. When hosts disagreed with Republican positions, they did so vocally. They asked tough questions during interviews, and they were only sometimes receptive to the information shared by Republican staffers.

In fact, former Republican staffer and RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie disliked the term coordination to describe his outreach to conservative talkers, because while their perspective left them more open to the information he proffered than the *New York Times* or NBC News, they would not simply mouth talking points.<sup>687</sup> Indeed, Taylor Gross, who served as Oliver North's producer before working in the White House, recalled that North hated to receive talking points

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>686</sup> Robert Walker, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>687</sup> Ed Gillespie, Interview With Author, July 31, 2013.

because he wanted to form his own opinions on issues.<sup>688</sup> In reality, conservative host Scott Hennen estimated that he accepted pitches from a Republican operative about one in ten times. Occasionally, Hennen accepted a guest that he did not particularly want in order to help out the Bush White House or congressional Republicans. Yet, he did so less to be a team player than to ensure that when he wanted another higher profile guest he would be able to get him/her.<sup>689</sup> Even when hosts accepted guests, Brian Walton found that they would not allow a guest to get his/her message out unfettered.

Additionally, even hosts who agreed with a Republican position were mindful of their need to entertain. Thus, they would not allow a politician to blather. Nor would they discuss any Republican agenda item (outside perhaps of the biggest issues such as the impeachment of President Clinton) ad nauseam. Chad Kolton remembered hosts often declining to discuss issues out of fear of boring their audiences because they had just discussed the issue the day before.<sup>690</sup> Hosts wanted interviews and discussions to be interesting and entertaining, not a forum for politicians to give speeches. Hennen strove to ask a guest something that he/she had not been asked fifty times that day already. Both he and colleague Lars Larson endeavored to create news when interviewing a guest.<sup>691</sup>As a result, from the political side, many talk radio appearances sought to convince the audience that the politician was a good guy who was doing the right thing for the country, as opposed to pushing legislation.<sup>692</sup> Often times, a guest had to settle for a quid pro quo in which he/she discussed a topic that the host wished to discuss, while also getting to mention a pet bill or cause.<sup>693</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>688</sup> Gross, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>689</sup> Scott Hennen Interview With Author, December 18, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>690</sup> Kolton, Interview With Author, November 16, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>691</sup> Hennen, Interview With Author, December; Lars Larson, Interview With Author, November

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>692</sup> Feehery, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>693</sup> Taylor Gross, Interview With Author.

Hosts also portrayed themselves as independent outsiders. Much of their cachet with listeners derived from hosts' perceived independence, honesty, and willingness to call things as they were. Thus, they needed to maintain Washington DC as a target, and could not be perceived by their audience as too chummy with Washington politicians, even Republicans with whom they typically agreed. As such, hosts were acutely sensitive to accusations of being Republican puppets. When Dan Bartlett, who served as Communications Director and Counselor to President Bush, told a reporter that conservative media personalities like Hugh Hewitt, "regurgitate exactly and put up on their blogs what you said to them," Hewitt reacted indignantly. Similarly, Milwaukee host Charlie Sykes angrily dismissed charges that he and a colleague utilized daily Republican talking points, and selected disagreements with Republican politicians with an eye towards demonstrating their independence without actually harming the politicians or party. Sykes labeled the charges part of a liberal conspiracy. Sykes labeled the charges part of a liberal conspiracy.

Appearing to be too closely aligned with the party apparatus would destroy hosts' credibility, which would hurt their bottom line. Ironically, their independence enhanced their input as party leaders because it gave them more credibility with their listeners, which increased their ability to mobilize listeners behind a cause. But they performed a delicate dance between appearing (and being) connected and not looking like puppets. They had to be conservatives first and Republicans second—which many truly were.

In fact, John Feehery felt like talk radio actually had a quietly antagonistic relationship with the Republican leadership. As Kevin Schweers noted, when he worked for Speaker

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>694</sup> The reporter asked Bartlett about Hewitt as a blogger, but he was also a major conservative radio host; Evan Smith, "Dan Bartlett on Life in the White House," *Texas Monthly*, January 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>695</sup> The piece did admit that the hosts only sometimes utilized the talking points. Dave Zweifel, "What's Wrong With Right-WingRadio," *The Capitol Times & Wisconsin State Journal*, December 1, 2008; Also, Dan Shelley, "Secrets of Talk Radio, *Milwaukee Magazine*, November 17, 2008, <a href="http://www.truth-out.org/archive/item/81082:secrets-of-talk-radio">http://www.truth-out.org/archive/item/81082:secrets-of-talk-radio</a>.

Gingrich, only when hosts saw a relationship with the Speaker as being mutually beneficial would they provide support. Mark Pfiefle reflected that relationships with hosts and producers required constant cultivation, and even then, it was only in certain instances that Republicans could flip a switch and utilize radio.<sup>696</sup>

Hosts' independence forced Republicans to consider the posture of talk radio when deciding how to vote on an issue. Even those members who openly scorned specific talk personalities understood that their constituents listened to talk radio, and that if talk hosts excoriated them, they would lose votes.<sup>697</sup> As a result, some Republicans would not vote for certain policies or programs because they did not want to inflame talk radio.<sup>698</sup> Unlike elected or appointed party leaders, hosts could not be trusted to defend and refrain from criticizing a Republican position or politician with which/whom they disagreed.

On occasion, interviews with prominent Republicans became quite contentious. Former Bush Deputy Press Secretary Tony Fratto recalled that conservative talkers could sometimes be harder on administration guests than centrist hosts. For example, Ed Gillespie had some tough interviews over immigration reform when he was a counselor to President Bush.<sup>699</sup> Especially on immigration, Fratto felt like hosts were not interested in engaging with White House provided guests, but rather, only in attacking them.<sup>700</sup>

Only two things limited how contentious talk radio hosts became with a Republican guest with whom they disagreed: first, the knowledge that going too far, and being disrespectful, or violating any prearranged terms for the interview risked being blacklisted and losing the ability

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>696</sup> Feehery, Interview With Author; Schweers, Interview With Author; Pfiefle, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>697</sup> Dick Armey, Interview With Author,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>698</sup> Christopher Shays, Interview With Author, August 11, 2013; Other interview subjects echoed this contention in different terms or with regard to specific legislation or programs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>699</sup> Ed Gillespie, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>700</sup> Tony Fratto, Interview With Author, July 2, 2013.

to get that guest (or in the case of guests booked through a larger booking operation, that group of guests) on their show.<sup>701</sup> Second, hosts who had some sort of a relationship with, or otherwise genuinely liked, the politician being interviewed tended to at least remain respectful or understanding, while politely disagreeing. For example, Chris Paulitz recalled that caustic Cincinnati host Bill Cunningham loved Senator George Voinovich and knew that they were in agreement on the big issues, and thus did not complain about the senator even when they disagreed. And yet, Cunningham subsequently called Voinovich a "crying clown" after the Senator cried when announcing his opposition to John Bolton's nomination to be the United States Ambassador to the United Nations. Cunningham also noted that he had gone on national radio programs to apologize for Voinovich and Senator Mike DeWine (R), both of whom he considered to be an embarrassment for some of the moderate positions they assumed.<sup>702</sup> Thus, hosts criticized even Republicans who they generally liked or admired—though they were respectful when the Republican in question appeared on their shows.

Fear of such condemnation and the political damage that it could do reflected radio hosts' ample power within the Republican Party, and led to swift corrective actions from Republican politicians.<sup>703</sup> In 2009, severe backlash forced both Republican Congressman Phil Gingrey (R-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>701</sup> Losing guests had the potential to damage what hosts cared about most— the quality of their radio programs. Indeed, hosts needed access to elected officials even more when they disagreed with a proposed policy, because conflict makes for good radio.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>702</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "A Teary-Eyed Rebel Defies Party Leadership," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2005.

<sup>703</sup> This use of hosts' power countered Donald Critchlow's argument that "Reagan failed to impose a permanent conservative regime within the Republican party itself." Reagan's deregulatory philosophy and veto led to abolition of the Fairness Doctrine, thereby allowing legally for the rise of conservative talk radio (see Chapter One for more on this subject). Conservative talk radio hosts, in turn, contributed significantly to the consolidation of conservative control over the Republican Party over the long term. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendency: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2011), 186.

GA) and RNC Chairman Michael Steele to publicly apologize for criticizing Limbaugh.<sup>704</sup> Local hosts often had similar power over state officials and congressmen. In 2006, a reporter dubbed Charlie Sykes, "arguably the state's [Wisconsin] most influential conservative voice."<sup>705</sup> Indeed, former Republican State Senate Leader Dale Schultz, a moderate, lamented that WTMJ [Sykes' station] had "every legislator in that area shaking in their boots." Additionally, he noted that, "it's humiliating when legislators have to be hauled in there to swear allegiance," after State Senate Republican Leader Scott Fitzgerald promised Sykes and his listeners that Republicans would not allow any new taxes.<sup>706</sup>

Republican politicians also had to remain vigilant that talk radio correctly understood and represented their positions, lest they provoke the wrath of hosts and listeners. For example, in 1999, Senator Paul Coverdell (R-GA), a devoted supporter of Bush's presidential campaign, received a call from his wife during a contentious gun debate in the Senate. She heard Limbaugh say that Bush favored mandatory background checks for purchases at gun shows. Although Bush had stated such a preference previously (which aligned with the position of Senate Democrats), he favored the Republican bill that called for voluntary checks. Fearing that Limbaugh's listeners might turn on Bush, Coverdell called Bush's staff, who quickly called Limbaugh with a clarification.<sup>707</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>704</sup> Gingrey criticized conservative talk show hosts for trying to strong arm Republicans into opposing the 2009 economic stimulus bill. Steele disputed the notion that Limbaugh was the leader of the Republican Party, called him "an entertainer," and criticized him for saying that he hoped President Obama would fail. Chafets, *Rush Limbaugh*, 8-9; 147-48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>705</sup> David Callender, "Thompson's Plans Add to State of Indecision," *The Capitol Times & Wisconsin State Journal*, April 14, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>706</sup> John Nichols, "The Courage, Conscience of Dale Schultz," *The Capitol Times & Wisconsin State Journal*, March 6 2013

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>707</sup> John Bresnahan, "Making Bush's Case in the Senate Coverdell Claims to Have 19 Endorsements for Texas Gov," *Roll Call*, May 31, 1999.

The relationship between conservative hosts and the cadre of moderates who they derisively dubbed "RINOs" or Republicans in Name Only offers the best case study through which to understand the independent leadership role maintained by talk radio hosts within the Republican Party. This case study also provides insight into the potentially problematic repercussions for elected Republicans, and the reason why hosts' independence could be problematic.

### **Hunting RINOs: Talk Radio and Moderate Republicans**

If one listens to talk radio today, the only more reviled creature than President Obama is the "RINO" or "Republican In Name Only." Conservative hosts and listeners target these judases for extinction because of their disloyalty and their unwillingness to prioritize fully achieving conservative goals 100% of the time. This unremitting hostility represents a shift from a more complicated relationship between moderate Republicans and conservative talkers before the mid-2000s. Hosts never refrained from bitterly criticizing "RINOS" when moderates complained about the influence of talk radio or actively opposed hosts' political and policy goals. However,

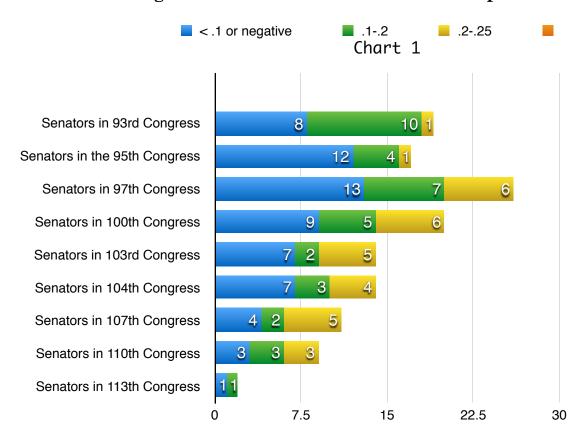
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>708</sup> Indeed, if anything, the category of unacceptable RINO behavior is only expanding.

until the mid-2000s, hosts had somewhat of a detente with these moderates, at least when they were the most conservative electable candidate from a district or state. When hosts could find something to like about a candidate, they tolerated some deviation from their preferred policy line, as they understood that doing so benefitted the Republican Party, and would, thus, indirectly advance their goals. Sometimes, this posture towards moderates left conservative hosts with buyers' remorse. Yet, before 2004, most hosts strategically refrained from supporting primary challenges to moderates that put seats at risk. They understood that large Republican margins in Congress and a Republican President best positioned them to achieve their policy goals.

Over time, however, many talk radio hosts transitioned from being pragmatic, if independent, party leaders who endeavored to elect as many Republicans as possible, to trying to purify the party. As their emphasis shifted, even some of the most loyal Republican hosts turned on some Republicans, or supported conservative candidates in primaries even though those candidates had a lesser chance of winning the general election. Often times, their pragmatic impulse to aid the party openly existed in conflict with their disgust with moderate Republicans and their desire to rid moderates from the party. Interestingly, while hosts had the ability to propel and aid primary challenges to "RINOs," they had minimal impact on the thinking of most moderate Republicans. Most moderates either did not listen to talk radio, and thus did not know that hosts were critiquing them, or did not care about such criticism for both practical and ideological reasons.

Hosts' hostility towards moderate Republicans resulted in a more conservative

Republican Party, one that was less competitive in Democratic-leaning places, and hastened the
death of moderate Republicanism. Although conservatism became ascendent within the
Republican Party long before talk radio developed, a durable cadre of moderates existed when



Rush Limbaugh began broadcasting nationally in 1988. Chart 1 depicts the number of moderate Republican senators by Congress based upon DW NOMINATE scores (which calculate a senator's career voting record on a scale of 1 to -1 with 1 being the most conservative and -1 being the most liberal).<sup>709</sup> Twenty moderates served in the 100th Congress as Limbaugh began

The literature on demise of moderate Republicans focuses on an earlier period. Nicol Rae wrote *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans: From 1952 to the Present*, in 1989 when the development of talk radio was in its nascent stages. Geoffrey Kabaservice's *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* focused primarily on the battle for the Republican Party's soul during the 1960s but did include a chapter on 1980 through 2012. This chapter mentioned the development of talk radio as one of many drivers of political polarization, but when talking about the factors plaguing moderates (and further diminishing their numbers in the 1990s and the 2000s), Kabaservice focused on outside groups like the Club for Growth, moves by congressional Republican leaders to punish dissidents, the poor treatment that moderates received at the hands of young firebrands, and partisan redistricting. As this chapter shows, however, talk radio was a significant element of this story. Hosts made it far more difficult for moderates to survive electorally, both by supporting primary challenges against them and by pushing the Republican agenda to the right. Hosts also made moderates' service far less pleasant; Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nicol C. Rae, *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans From 1952 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

broadcasting "across the fruited plain," which actually represented an increase over the 93rd and 95th Congresses.

The subsequent development of conservative talk radio contributed to moderates becoming scarce over the next two decades. While many moderates ignored talk radio, their unwillingness to conform put them at risk in primary elections. To Conservative hosts exerted significant influence in primaries because of their ability to drive fundraising for insurgent challengers, as well as their ability to motivate their listeners to actively support candidates. In low turnout, down ballot primaries, hosts possessed the ability to shape their listeners' views of the candidates.

Hosts' influence in primary elections also made risk adverse conservatives less willing to compromise, out of fear of losing a primary, which made it far harder for Republicans to govern.

#### **Detente**

To understand hosts' increasing hostility towards moderate Republicans, one must first understand their relationship with moderates before the mid-2000s. Conservative talkers never embraced moderate Republicans or the kinds of compromise that they favored. Instead, hosts criticized compromises and lashed out against those moderate Republicans who proved to be impediments to their agenda.<sup>711</sup> For example, in 1995, after Senate Appropriations Chairman

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>710</sup>By utilizing their ability to influence primary elections to punish elected officials who opposed their policy agenda, and aid candidates who supported it, hosts epitomized the new style of outsider party leader who cared primarily about capturing government to enact a policy agenda. Seth Masket argued that primaries were the critical location in which these new types of leaders exerted influence over the party coalition. See Seth E. Masket, *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>711</sup> This criticism continued a long history of conservative media outlets expressing hostility towards moderate Republicans. For example, in *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party*, Michael Bowen detailed how *Human Events*, *National Review* and other conservative publications regularly eviscerated the Dewey/Eisenhower moderate faction within the Republican Party in the 1940s and 1950s; Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Mark Hatfield (R-OR) refused to provide the final vote necessary to pass the Balanced Budget Amendment, Limbaugh declared, "Do the Democrats have something on Mark Hatfield? Does Hatfield owe the Democrats something rather than the Republicans? ... Just pull his chairmanship away from him. This is a war. ... Obviously Hatfield isn't on the team." During their careers, Representatives Connie Morella (R-MD) and Amo Houghton (R-NY) received plenty of backlash from talk radio listeners for their positions on controversial issues, including the 1995 government shutdown, the Iraq War, and the Assault Weapons Ban. Morella knew that the angry constituents sending her postcards and letters listened to Limbaugh because her office would follow up with them to find out where they got their information.

Congressman Peter Blute's (R-MA) (himself later a conservative talker) experience summarized the attitude of conservative hosts towards moderate Republicans in the 1990s. He felt that hosts in New England generally understood that he was the best that they were going to get in Massachusetts. Thus, they cut him some slack, which more rigid national hosts might not have done.<sup>714</sup> Nonetheless, Blute faced a backlash from talk radio (and the rest of his conservative base) after he voted in favor of the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban.<sup>715</sup>

During the fractious debate over impeaching President Clinton, conservative hosts hammered any Republican who was on the fence about impeachment, moderate or conservative, and encouraged their listeners to bombard these congressmen with phone calls and faxes.

Representative Houghton and conservative Representative Mark Souder (R-IN) faced withering

<sup>712 &</sup>quot;50 State Report—Oregon: Hatfield Faces '96 Wrath of BBA Vote, If He Runs," *The Hotline*, March 3, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>713</sup> Connie Morella, Interview With Author, August 22, 2013; Chet Lunner, Interview With Author, September 5, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>714</sup> At the time that Blute served in Congress (1992-1996), there were not many nationally syndicated conservative hosts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>715</sup> Peter Blute, Interview With Author, May 3, 2013.

pressure and threats from local and national talk radio hosts to support impeaching President Clinton.<sup>716</sup> Fort Wayne host Dave Macy proclaimed Souder, "a traitor to the rule of law" after his initial opposition to impeachment<sup>717</sup> and attacked him to such a degree that Macy eventually lost advertisers and his time slot.<sup>718</sup> Souder found that some talk radio hosts "cranked up the rhetoric fires" to an extreme degree in order to "vehemently and obnoxiously attack Congressmen."719 Limbaugh encouraged his listeners to call Congressman Chris Shays (CT), one of four Republicans who voted against all four articles of impeachment, and to attend a town hall that Shays held on the issue. Twelve hundred people attended, and another 6,000 people could not get into the hall. Would be attendees jammed the New England Thruway for a half mile from the exit for the venue. Shays believed that talk radio was the biggest advocate for impeachment. He noted that he and Morella, another of the Republicans who opposed impeachment, eventually lost elections. He felt as though talk radio and impeachment played a role in his loss, because he needed every Republican vote that he could get in his marginal district, and some Republicans irrevocably turned against him after the pounding that he took on the airwaves over impeachment.<sup>720</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>716</sup> Jerry Zremsky, "Houghton Hounded By Critics, Media," *Buffalo News*, December 10, 1998; Robert J. McCarthy, "Houghton's 'No' Decision Spawns 2000 Opponent, Voter Complaints," *Buffalo News*, December 12, 1998; Rachel Van Dongan, "Colleagues, Constituents Lead Souder to Rethink Vote," *Roll Call*, December 17, 1998. Brian Fitzpatrick, Interview with Author; Chet Lunner, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>717</sup> Souder always had doubts about the propriety of President Clinton's behavior. Nonetheless, he opposed impeachment until he felt as though the appropriate evidentiary bar had been met for impeachable conduct because setting bad legal precedents concerned him. After reading depositions from the case, Souder concluded that the third article of impeachment contained a series of actions that at the very least met the standard for impeaching and sending the case to the Senate, and as such, he voted for that article. Souder, E-mail Messages to Author, September 26, 2013 and October 12, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>718</sup> Van Dongan, "Colleagues, Constituents Lead Souder to Rethink Vote;" "Clinton Accused: The Impeachment Vote," *Washington Post Politics Online Special Report*, <a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/housevote/in.htm">http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/housevote/in.htm</a>, accessed June 4, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>719</sup> Mark Souder, E-mail Messages to Author, September 26, 2013 and October 12, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>720</sup> Christopher Shays, Interview With Author, August 11, 2013.

Even during this period, some hosts refused to countenance moderate Republicans. In 1998, Milwaukee host Mark Belling endorsed liberal Democrat Tammy Baldwin for Congress over Republican Josephine Musser, because he objected to Musser's position on "partial-birth" abortion. He argued that, "with Republicans like these, who needs the Democrats?" In explaining this endorsement, Belling declared, "Tammy Baldwin is an honest left-wing crackpot. Jo Musser is a duplicitous left-wing crackpot. I'll go with the honest one."

Nonetheless, during this period most hosts pragmatically<sup>722</sup> understood that electing moderate Republicans meant not electing Democrats. Republican victories meant conservatives controlling Congress, and even moderate Republicans agreed with hosts on far more issues than did Democrats. Further, moderate Republicans might, out of party loyalty or in response to pressure or threats from leadership, at least support bills procedurally with which they did not fully agree.<sup>723</sup>

In 1994, Limbaugh displayed and explained the logic behind this pragmatism. He gently critiqued New York City Mayor Rudolph Guliani for endorsing liberal Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo for reelection. He argued, "Mayor, you don't defeat liberals by joining them. You defeat them with taxes, and you defeat them with lower taxes. You defeat them with economic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>721</sup> Chris Murphy, "Musser's Abortion Stand Assailed GOP Pledges Support Amid Call For Fund Cut," *The Capitol Times*, October 16, 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>722</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, however, overstated the pragmatism displayed by Limbaugh. They cited his opposition to Pat Buchanan's 1996 presidential campaign (over trade issues), as well as his deft handling of Arnold Schwarzenegger's candidacy in California's 2003 gubernatorial recall election to argue: "Limbaugh is ultimately interested in electing Republicans rather than Democrats. He is pragmatic about ensuring the election of those as like minded as the electoral process permits." Their argument fails to consider the change in Limbaugh's stance towards moderates over time that is described in this chapter, and generally overstates his felicity towards them. Arguably, by 2006, this analysis was no longer valid; Jameson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 118.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>723</sup> Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29-30; Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policymaking* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 166-168.

policy. You defeat them with policies that enrich personal freedom which they stand against.

You do not defeat them by joining."<sup>724</sup> Similarly, Limbaugh advised businessman Mitt Romney, who was running against Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA):

You think you can make these massive monumental momentous changes with can't we all get along?' I mean, the aggressor in combat makes the rules and the aggressors are the Democrats. They've had [longterm control of the House and the Senate]<sup>725</sup> they've set rules that de--deny the Republicans even a chance to bring their issues to a debate, and they are more partisan, Mr. Romney, than you can possibly imagine. You've got a week to turn this around and I don't mean to hit you too hard, but you come out as a partisan, identify yourself as things--for things you stand for.

Yet, even as Limbaugh pushed Guliani and Romney to advocate for conservative policies (which he did without the harshness with which he later critiqued moderates), he did not demand ideological purity. He counseled his television viewers not to be angry at Romney, nor to vote against him, because he was insufficiently conservative. Rather, voting out Kennedy would have symbolic importance, and electing a moderate would be a huge move to the right. Even if Romney was not, "the ultimate guy we want, but at least it's in the right direction—at least Romney's in the right direction."

Limbaugh also warned that single issue voting threatened to kill the Republican Party.

Epitomizing pragmatic party leadership, he explained to a caller why she should support George

Nethercutt in his race against House Speaker Tom Foley (D-WA) even though she disagreed with

Nethercutt on fetal tissue research. He asked her which party promised the best opportunity to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>724</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired Oct 27, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>725</sup> This section features several long quotes because the statements of talk radio hosts offer critical insight into their views regarding moderates. Because of the length of some of these quotes (which are actually short excerpts from longer broadcast segments), in several places I have summarized non-germane sections in brackets. My summaries simply condense the quotes to a manageable length, and in no way are the sections summarized open to any interpretation. They were all straightforward statements that added little to the meaning of the quote for the purposes of this dissertation. However, completely replacing them with an ellipsis would have presented comprehension problems for the reader simply because it would have left sentences unfinished.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>726</sup> Rush Limbaugh, October 27, 1994; Rush Limbaugh, "LOOK AT THE UPCOMING ELECTION AND HOW REPUBLICANS CAN DO BETTER," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 31 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

achieve her goal on the issue, and reminded her that Foley was the "ringleader" of the party that had held "domineering, undemocratic" control of the House for forty years. He warned that sitting the race out would keep Democrats in power and leave her shut out of the game.

Subsequently, Limbaugh explained the rationale behind his attitude. Single issue voters needed to understand that you did not win in one election. Even if it took five elections to accomplish a goal, it was worth taking the first step. Opposing that first step because of a candidate's position on a single issue only set back the cause. He cited the 1986 California Senate election when pro-life conservatives refused to support pro-choice Republican Ed Zschau against Democratic Senator Alan Cranston. Limbaugh explained that these voters shot themselves in the foot, because only a Republican controlled Senate, which would confirm President Reagan's judicial nominees, provided any chance of doing away with *Roe* V. *Wade*. Supporting Zschau would also have gotten rid of Cranston sooner, and might have prevented the liberal Barbara Boxer from succeeding him.<sup>727</sup>

This pragmatism sometimes left hosts with buyer's remorse. After President Bush's defeat in 1992, Limbaugh predicted, "And there's going to be a huge battle for the soul of the Republican Party. And I would make this contention. I would say to you that the moderate patrician wing of the Republican Party just demonstrated why we don't want to let them run the party anymore. The conservatives are going to have to move in and take over." A decade later, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella detailed, Limbaugh assiduously avoided actively

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>727</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October, 27, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Rush Limbaugh, "Look at the Upcoming Election and How Republicans Can Do Better," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired October 31, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment); Limbaugh also told the Zschau story on his June 1st, 1990 radio show, which C-SPAN recorded. See <a href="http://www.c-span.org/video/?12584-1/">http://www.c-span.org/video/?12584-1/</a> Rush at 1:21:50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>728</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired November 6, 1992 (Multimedia Entertainment), television transcript.

opposing Arnold Schwarzenegger during the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election campaign. He acknowledged that Schwarzenegger was not a conservative. Yet, as with Romney in 1994, rather than opposing Schwarzenegger, Limbaugh offered advice on how he could run as a conservative, and noted his conservatism on certain issues. Yet, once Schwarzenegger was in office, he and Limbaugh engaged in a war of words over his policies that included the Governor calling Limbaugh irrelevant on national television.<sup>729</sup>

#### **Growing Hostility**

Perhaps this buyer's remorse slowly led to conservative hosts rethinking their willingness to support or tolerate moderate Republicans. Other possible reasons include hosts' horror over the free spending George W. Bush Administration, and a sense that the opportunity was ripe, to borrow from Limbaugh's 1994 explanation, to take the final step after incremental gains throughout the 1990s delivered unified Republican government. In fact, disgust after a half decade of unified Republican governance failed to achieve their policy goals also might have motivated conservative hosts, as might the way that moderate Senator Jim Jeffords (VT) briefly gave Democrats control of the Senate by switching parties.<sup>730</sup> Furthermore, like many other conservatives, hosts might simply have become more conservative, less pragmatic, and less willing to countenance compromise over time. Finally, when Democrats regained control of Congress in 2006, conservative talkers might have felt liberated to more frequently challenge apostates because they no longer had to worry about

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>729</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 115-120; "Schwarzenegger Sold Out," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 20, 2007, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/03/20/schwarzenegger sold out">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/03/20/schwarzenegger sold out</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>730</sup> Jeffords left the Republican Party and became an independent who caucused with the Democrats, thereby tipping the balance of power in what had been an evenly divided Senate.

risking the Republican majority.<sup>731</sup> Regardless of their reasoning (and it might have differed from host to host),<sup>732</sup> hosts steadily adopted a more combative posture towards impure Republicans as the 2000s progressed.

Hosts' handling of important Republican Senate primaries in 2004, 2006, and 2010, and their reaction to moderates who supported legislation that they opposed demonstrated their steadily growing hostility. In 2004, veteran moderate Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) (Specter had a DW-NOMINATE score of .057<sup>733</sup>) faced a serious primary challenge from Congressman Pat Toomey.<sup>734</sup> Toomey had the backing of the conservative Club for Growth, and Specter had the support of the Republican establishment, including President Bush, which worried that Toomey could not win the general election.<sup>735</sup>

Limbaugh's handling of the race<sup>736</sup> exhibited the competing impulses facing conservative talkers. Limbaugh discussed the race occasionally,<sup>737</sup> and as the election approached he mentioned that the potential existed for a big upset. However, Limbaugh did not rabidly attack Specter, perhaps because of his pragmatic impulse, and perhaps because the senator had always

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>731</sup> After the 2006 elections, talk radio hosts faced a Democratic controlled Congress for the first time since the format gained national prominence in the mid-1990s.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>732</sup>It is almost impossible to generalize about hosts' reasoning because most hosts were independent thinkers, and many did not even consider themselves to be activists or party leaders. Many might not even acknowledge a shift in their behavior, even though the evidence indicated otherwise.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>733</sup> Royce Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores With Bootstrapped Standard Errors," <a href="http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm">http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm</a>, last updated May 25, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>734</sup> The Specter-Toomey race might understate how much talk radio hosts had turned against moderate Republicans because Specter was one of the few moderates who aggressively courted both national and local conservative radio. This outreach may have at least muted some of the opposition that he faced from conservative talkers.

<sup>735</sup> Indeed, President Bush ended up losing Pennsylvania by 128,869 votes, whereas Specter would be reelected by 594,412 votes, indicating that the Senator's moderation contributed to his victory. "Elections 2004: Pennsylvania," *The Washington Post*, last updated November 24, 2004, <a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/elections/2004/pa/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/elections/2004/pa/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>736</sup> As a general rule, Limbaugh did not endorse in primary elections.

<sup>737</sup> Mark Dion, Interview With Author, September 17, 2013.

been available to him.<sup>738</sup> For example, he reported that Specter would benefit from a \$50,000 donation to the Republican Mainstream Partnership from liberal billionaire George Soros, who was simultaneously spending millions to oppose President Bush's reelection. Yet, rather than endorse Toomey or hammer Specter, Limbaugh gave the senator the opportunity to explain to his listeners that he had no idea that Soros made the contribution and deny that he had anything to do with it. Limbaugh even allowed Specter to claim that he had "no connection with the Mainstream Partnership," when in fact, as National Review pointed out, Specter was a member of the organization.<sup>739</sup> Limbaugh went so far as to note, "frankly, it looks like a setup when you look at it. Soros knows that he's anathema to Republicans. To get his name associated with one is certainly not helpful, and there's been no indication Soros is supportive of you prior to this, so it sort of stunk." Limbaugh made this argument, even though, as Specter then acknowledged, Soros had contributed money to him in 1996. Finally, when given an opportunity to at least solicit promises on issues dear to conservatives (Specter was in line to chair the Senate Judiciary Committee), or to grill Specter on unpopular votes he had taken, Limbaugh, instead, stuck to security and intelligence issues, which did not expose any of Specter's more liberal positions.<sup>740</sup> When Toomey's campaign requested that Limbaugh provide their candidate with equal time, he refused.741

Other national hosts opposed Senator Specter's reelection, including Lars Larson, and as the race tightened, they became more boldly pro-Toomey and mentioned the race more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>738</sup> Chris Nicholas, Interview With Author, August 27, 2013; Chris Mottola, Interview With Author, August 23, 2013.

<sup>739</sup> Deroy Murdock, "The Bush-Soros Pick," *National Review Online*, April 19, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>740</sup> "Specter: No Soros Connection," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, April 14, 2004, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/04/14/specter">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/04/14/specter</a> no soros connection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>741</sup> Dion, Interview With Author.

frequently. These mentions drove funds to the Toomey campaign and the Club For Growth.<sup>742</sup> Most of Pennsylvania's significant local hosts also supported Toomey, though cautiously. For most of the race it looked like Toomey could not win, and they did not want to needlessly risk the Senator's wrath.<sup>743</sup> By contrast, Philadelphia's most significant host, Michael Smerconish,<sup>744</sup> supported Specter to such a degree that he was the first person that the Senator thanked during his victory speech.<sup>745</sup> It was, however, especially striking that the majority of local and national hosts opposed Specter's reelection because he cultivated talk radio—frequently doing interviews with local and national hosts of all persuasions. Additionally, his campaign advertised significantly on talk radio, which especially for small stations, translated into important revenue. This advertising, to some degree, did keep hosts from becoming rabidly anti-Specter. His campaign insisted that, in exchange for their advertising dollars, hosts who opposed the Senator do so fairly.<sup>746</sup>

Hosts again displayed competing impulses in 2005 when Limbaugh read off the names of House Republicans who voted against drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). He noted that the Mainstream Republican Partnership, which supported their position, received funding from Soros. He also lamented these moderate Republicans derailing the President's agenda:

it is just unacceptable when a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of Republicans in Congress also rear up in opposition and join the liberal Democrats to derail an agenda. At some point that has to be faced. It has to be faced because these RINOs, these moderates, are undermining our agenda [on a list of issues] -- and I'll give you some names. You want some names? Here they are: Olympia Snowe, John McCain, George Voinovich,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>742</sup> Lars Larson, E-mail Message to Author, August 7, 2013; Dion, Interview With Author.

<sup>743</sup> Nicholas, Interview With Author; Mottola, Interview With Author; Dion, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>744</sup> At the time, Smerconish was perceived to be a conservative who would also emcee a rally for President Bush. Subsequently, he moderated and became an independent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>745</sup> Smerconish, E-mail Message to Author, July 30, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>746</sup> Mottola, Interview With Author.

Mike Castle, Christopher Shays, and about 30 to 35 others... Yes, we do [have free and open debate], but when it comes to... Your family is your family, and when you go to battle with other families, folks, you want your family on your side, not joining the family across the street firing back at you -- and that's what's happening here, and it's because liberals hate conservatives and liberals fear conservatives. I don't care if they're Republican liberals or Democrat liberals, they're still liberals. They're not "moderates." Don't hit me with that. There's no such thing as a moderate. A moderate is just a liberal disguise, and they are doing everything they can to derail the conservative agenda, and they've been frustrated, they haven't been able to do anything about it because conservatism has been so strong. This propaganda attack on the president has weakened him. They're looking at the polls. "All right, the president's finished, he's weak, we can stand up now and defeat the rest of these conservatives," and so forth.

Yet, Limbaugh resisted calling for the defeat of the Republicans whose names he had read.<sup>747</sup> He wanted his listeners to know their identities, which would allow them to pressure the moderates to vote properly in the future, but the line had not yet been crossed beyond which ideological considerations would clearly outweigh pragmatic ones.

The 2006 Rhode Island Senate primary presented a clear sign that the scale was tipping towards hosts demanding strict adherence to their preferred agenda. Senator Lincoln Chafee, a liberal (DW Nominate score of -.046), but arguably the only Republican capable of winning a Senate race in Rhode Island,<sup>748</sup> faced a primary challenge from conservative Cranston Mayor Stephen Laffey. Once again, the Republican establishment, including the Republican Senate Campaign Committee, aggressively supported Chafee. The establishment feared that Laffey would lose the general election, which might cost Republicans their Senate majority.<sup>749</sup> Yet, radio hosts opposed Chafee's reelection, regardless of the consequences, and this time they were more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>747</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Moderate RINOS Undermine the GOP," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 11, 2005, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/11/11/moderate rinos undermine the gop2">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/11/11/moderate rinos undermine the gop2</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>748</sup> Democrats had won the last five Presidential elections in Rhode Island by twenty-one, twenty-nine, thirty-three, eighteen, and eleven and a half points respectively. See David Leip, "United States Presidential Elections Results: Rhode Island," <a href="http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/">http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/</a>, accessed June 4, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>749</sup> Republicans did go on to lose their Senate majority by one seat.

vehement. In July of 2006, infuriated by Chafee's advocacy of a cease fire between Israel and Lebanon, T50 Limbaugh railed,

We need a ceasefire? All this is Bush's fault? He needs to be defeated. It's about time we get rid of these -- whatever you want to characterize Link Chafee as being -- out of the Senate. This is absurd. It's Bush's fault! Bush missed the opportunities? There needs to be a ceasefire? ... All the while, by the way, George Bush is helping Linc Chafee in his reelection effort just as he helped Arlen Specter. But Chafee's fallen five points behind in Rhode Island, and feels he has to come out and bite the hand that feeds him in order to boost his poll numbers up. This is not exactly the display of the execution of core principles. <sup>751</sup>

Even Hugh Hewitt, perhaps the biggest party stalwart among conservative hosts, opposed Chafee's reelection. In twenty-five years on the air, Chafee was the only elected Republican who Hewitt opposed publicly. Hewitt supported other moderates, including Specter, but he did not consider Chafee to be a Republican because he voted against the party on several critical litmus test issues.<sup>752</sup> After Chafee won the primary, Hewitt labeled the victory to be "an unfortunate development" and reaffirmed his belief that Chafee's defeat would be in the best interest of the party. Hewitt even refused to donate to the NRSC because it supported Chafee.<sup>753</sup>

Unlike Specter, talkers saw Chafee as ineffectual and far more of a social liberal than they perceived Specter to be.<sup>754</sup> Limbaugh summarized talk radio's attitude about Chafee, and

The summer of this likely that Chafee called for a cease fire between Israel and Lebanon. In a debate later in the summer, Laffey attacked Chafee for supporting such a cease fire. Indeed, Limbaugh discussed the conflict between Israel and Lebanon during his show on July 20th. However, the blog post from which the quote came did not include that context, Limbaugh's website archive did not include a transcript of this particular piece of his show (it often only includes parts of each show), Newspaper database searches for Chafee for that time period also did not provide confirmation, and the recording of Limbaugh's July 20 program available in the Library of Congress talk radio archive cut off fifteen minutes early, and did not contain this remark. See Katherine Gregg and Mark Arsenault, "SENATE CANDIDATES GO ONE-ON-ONE - Chafee, Laffey tangle over attack ads, taxes and war," *The Providence Journal*, August 18, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>751</sup> Ottoe, "Rush vs. Chafee and SCLM Hypocrisy," *Daily Kos* (blog), July 20, 2006, <a href="http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/07/20/229184/-Rush-vs-Chafee-and-SCLM-Hypocrisy#">http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/07/20/229184/-Rush-vs-Chafee-and-SCLM-Hypocrisy#</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>752</sup> Hugh Hewitt, Interview With Author, November 5, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>753</sup> "McCain at the New School: Day 4," *The Hotline*, SE: National Briefing; Blogometer, May 23, 2006; "It's '08 Already," *The Hotline*, SE: National Briefing; Blogometer, July 24, 2006.

<sup>754</sup> Nicholas, Interview With Author; Mottola, Interview With Author.

moderates more generally, when he declared that if a Republican won a three way Senate race in Connecticut, "it would be a Lowell Weicker type, may as well have a Democrat, it would be a Linc Chafee type." While Hewitt presented a logical argument as to why Chafee was different than other moderate Republicans, his opposition to the Senator's reelection clearly prioritized ideology over pragmatism.

An exchange between caller Ken and Sean Hannity on August 4th, 2006 crystalized the open tension between hosts' pragmatism and their disgust with RINOs. Ken railed about a few RINOS and explained that if Republicans lost in November it would be their own fault. Ken wanted RINOs to understand that they would pay a price if they did not start meeting the expectations of the Republicans who elected them. Yet, he also felt as though conservatives could not permit Democrats to win. He suspected that elected Republicans probably understood that loyal partisans felt this way, freeing them do whatever they wanted. Hannity expanded Ken's list of RINOs to include maverick conservative Senators Chuck Hagel (NE), Lindsay Graham (SC), and John McCain (AZ).<sup>756</sup> He also acknowledged that Republicans had weakened their position with the base because of a few issue positions, and by allowing liberals in their party to "maneuver more left wing positions." But he, too, quickly concluded that when comparing those

<sup>755 &</sup>quot;Matthews Remark Exposes Left-Wing-Anti-Semitism," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, August 9, 2006, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2006/08/09/matthews">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2006/08/09/matthews</a> remark exposes left wing anti semitism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>756</sup> Hannity's inclusion of these three senators on the list of "RINOs" indicated that not only was moderation becoming less acceptable to hosts, but they were also expanding the definition of what constituted impermissible moderation. In 2006, Hagel, Graham, and McCain had respective DW Nominate scores of .304, .456, and .39, which were far more conservative than either Specter or Chafee's scores. Nonetheless, they earned this derisive label for three reasons. First, they had disagreed with hosts sufficiently often on key issues to provoke their wrath. Second, they hailed from conservative states. Finally, the pool of actual ideological moderates had diminished to such a degree as to leave senators such as Hagel, Graham, and McCain, who were conservative on most issues, but independent-minded, appearing to be far more moderate than they actually were. See Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores."

sins to the risk of "Nancy Pelosi being Speaker and third in line to the presidency," he and his listeners had no option.<sup>757</sup>

After the 2006 and 2008 elections gave Democrats unified control of government, the last vestiges of pragmatism seemed to have fallen away for conservative talkers. In 2009, eight moderate House Republicans voted for a climate change bill that included a carbon tax, which outraged Limbaugh. He excoriated them, theorizing that the predominately northeastern Republicans voted for the bill in order to receive campaign contributions from Wall Street allies who stood to benefit from the trading of carbon credits. Limbaugh argued, "this whole bill, this nonexistent bill is so un-American everybody who voted for it from Pelosi on down needs to be jacked out of there in the next election. He noted that thirty Democrats voted against the bill and argued, "these eight Republicans made this happen."

This opprobrium of apostate Republicans appeared at first glance to be similar to Limbaugh's previous harangues against such judases. Yet, it actually differed significantly because he called for their defeat. Furthermore, in several cases, replacing these congressmen with more conservative candidates would have severely damaged Republicans' chances of holding their seats (Delaware, for example, which elected its congressman statewide, had voted for the Democratic presidential nominee by an average of fifteen points in 1996, 2000, 2004, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>757</sup> Sean Hannity, *The Sean Hannity Show*, August 4, 2006 accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>758</sup> Judging from Hannity's explanation to caller Ken as to why conservatives needed to remain loyal to the Republican Party, the motivation for this last step may have been that there remained little else left to be lost. Yet, this conclusion would demonstrate a shift in thinking, because unified Democratic control of government was precisely the state of affairs that prompted Limbaugh to urge pragmatism in 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>759</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Madoff Sentenced to 150 Years, Waxman and Markey Remain Free," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, June 29, 2009, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/06/29/madoff sentenced to 150 years waxman and markey remain free">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/06/29/madoff sentenced to 150 years waxman and markey remain free</a>.

2008<sup>760</sup>). By contrast, when Senator Hatfield retired in 1996, the more conservative Gordon Smith (Hatfield had a DW-NOMINATE score of .013, whereas Smith would accumulate a score of .137)<sup>761</sup> won election and held the seat for two terms. Thus, Limbaugh could reasonably attack Hatfield without believing that he risked handing a seat to Democrats.

A 2009 special election for a New York House seat confirmed conservative hosts' determination to pull the Republican Party to the right, even at the expense of losing seats. The race pitted liberal Republican State Assemblywoman Dede Scozzafava against Conservative Party Candidate Doug Hoffman and Democrat Bill Owens. President Obama had won fifty-two percent of the vote in the district. Conservative Republicans divided sharply, but both former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Republican House Leader John Boehner supported Scozzafava, and the National Republican Congressional Committee spent over \$900,000 bolstering her candidacy. Displaying their independence from the elected Republican leadership, top talk radio hosts Limbaugh, Hannity, Mark Levin, and Glenn Beck all endorsed Hoffman. Fe2 The Republican decision to nominate a liberal angered Hannity. He went so far as to declare, "See, I'm a conservative. I'm not a Republican. I am a Reagan conservative." He drew a parallel between Reagan's challenge to Gerald Ford and the special election because, in both cases, the Republican Party needed to get its act together to resume representing conservative principles. Thus, Hannity implied that a different long-term calculus (from the one that Limbaugh had

<sup>760 &</sup>quot;Delaware," 270 to Win, accessed June 4, 2015, http://www.270towin.com/states/Delaware.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>761</sup>Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>762</sup> Don Surber, "Fighting for the Soul of the Republican Party, Doug Hoffman and Dede Scozzafava Suddenly are the Stars," *The Charleston Gazette*, October 29, 2009;

considered in 1994) dictated that challenging moderates would provide a greater long term benefit than pragmatism.<sup>763</sup>

Limbaugh did not even consider Scozzafava to be a Republican. Rather, he argued, "we actually have two liberal Obama Democrats, one calling herself a Republican, and you've got the Reagan conservative Hoffman in there." The Republican Party infuriated Limbaugh by running ads against Hoffman.

I ruined two hours of my day when I saw that the Republican Party was running ads against Hoffman. They have a death wish. The Republican Party has a death wish. Gallup: 40% of Americans now say they are conservative, 20% say they're liberal, 36% say they're moderates. And of those three groups, which one is being ignored -- not just ignored -- which one is being attacked by the Republican Party? The conservatives! ... The Republican Party, as constituted is as dangerous to this country as the Democrat Party is. 764

Thus, Limbaugh had done an about face from 1994. Now the failure to heed conservatives' wishes presented the threat to the future of the Republican Party.

When Scozzafava withdrew from the race and endorsed Owens, Limbaugh reacted gleefully because it exposed moderates as unprincipled liberals. He argued:

Moderates by definition have no principles. They're wishy washy. A typical moderate is Lindsey Grahamnesty [Senator Graham]. A typical moderate. They're all over the place...Dede Scozzafava has just delivered a teachable moment for those who lack a keen sense of the obvious. RINOs cannot be trusted. Republicans-in-name-only cannot be trusted. They aren't principled. You vote 'em into office and you're going to get [a laundry list of Democratic supported policies].

To betray her party, Dede Scozzafava at this point in time when conservatives have been sounding the alarm about the dangers of RINOs, is a gift. For Dede Scozzafava to endorse the Democrat in NY-23, I know a lot of people got mad about it and so forth, no, folks, it's great! Dede Scozzafava is showing everybody who Republicans-in-name-only are. Dede Scozzafava is illustrating precisely what moderate Republicans will do and who moderate Republicans are. She has just put an exclamation point on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>763</sup> Sean Hannity, Conservative Taking the GOP; Interview With Dick Morris," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired November 2, 2009; Sean Hannity, Independents Vote for GOP Candidates; Videos Surfaced of Kids Praising Obama in School," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired November 4, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>764</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Why NY-23 Isn't a Third-Party Race," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, October 27, 2009, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/10/27/why">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/10/27/why</a> ny 23 isn t a third party race.

problem with RINOs. They eventually end up exactly where most liberals do. They're just a little slower in getting there. But they end up where liberals are.<sup>765</sup>

The 2010 Delaware Senate primary definitively marked the death of any pragmatism that may have previously guided conservative radio hosts. The NRSC recruited popular nine term Congressman and former Governor Mike Castle (who, because of the nature of House, 766 had a conservative DW Nominate score of .726, but a lifetime American Conservative Union score of 51.69 (on a scale of 100)767) to run for an open Senate seat in the very liberal state. Christine O'Donnell, a conservative activist with a checkered history of past statements and character questions, who had lost a 2008 Senate race to Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. by almost thirty points, opposed him. Most analysts considered Castle to be a heavy favorite against Democrat Chris Coons in the general election. 768 The race, again, split conservatives, with establishment conservatives supporting Castle, and the new Tea Party Express and talk radio supporting O'Donnell. 769 Hannity summarized the talk radio view of the race for his television audience. "Christine O'Donnell, the establishment is just trying to assassinate her character, smear her. And here's a guy, Mike Castle voted for Obamacare, 770 voted for TARP [Troubled Asset Relief

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>765</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Dede Scozzafava Screws RINOs," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 2, 2009, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/11/02/dede">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/11/02/dede</a> scozzafava screws rinos.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>766</sup> Moderates' DW Nominate scores were far more conservative in the House than in the Senate, likely because of the control that leadership exerted over what legislation received votes, and the demand for party loyalty on many procedural votes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>767</sup> American Conservative Union, "Federal Legislative Ratings," <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?year1=2002&chamber=12&state1=45&sortable=1">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?year1=2002&chamber=12&state1=45&sortable=1</a>, accessed June 3, 2015. Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>768</sup> O'Donnell went on to lose the general election 56.6% to 40%.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>769</sup> Chris Good, "Tea Party Express's Delaware Ads - Audio," <u>atlantic.com</u>, September 1, 2010; David Eldridge, "In Delaware, GOP insurgent storms Castle; Moderate Republican taking 'tea party' challenger seriously," *The Washington Times*, September 3, 2010; Chris Matthews, "Obama's News Conference; Quran Burning; "don't ask, don't tell" is Unconstitutional; 9/11 No Longer a Day Free of Politics," *Hardball*, MSNBC, September 10, 2010; Howard Kurtz, "Media Notes: Conservative pundits on 'suicide' watch," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>770</sup> Hannity's claim that Castle supported "Obamacare" was incorrect. He opposed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2009 and 2010.

Program], voted for cap and tax, the establishment wants him."<sup>771</sup> On election night, as it appeared that O'Donnell would win, Hannity argued:

I don't think we can make progress in the country with rhino Republicans. I don't think you are going to stop Obama's radical agenda without people that are really committed to cutting taxes, to stopping spending, really strong principles. How could this guy be one of several Republicans to vote for a - killing bill like cap and tax and expect conservatives in a primary to vote for him? You know what? I'm sorry, he brought this on himself."<sup>772</sup>

The race prompted Limbaugh to announce the Limbaugh rule governing primary elections. This rule supplanted the Buckley rule, named for William F. Buckley, which entailed voting for the most electable conservative who could win a general election. By contrast, the Limbaugh ruled dictated "in an election year when voters are fed up with liberalism and socialism, when voters are clearly frightened of where the hell the country is headed, vote for the most conservative Republican in the primary, period." Limbaugh mused that Castle would:

be just another liberal but he's going to have an R next to his name. Now, somebody tell me how that helps the conservative movement? I can understand the Republican Party being for Castle... But I don't understand people who profess to be conservatives supporting this guy... The bigger risk to me [as opposed to the risk of O'Donnell losing] is that RINOs, Republicans-in-Name-Only like Mike Castle, tarnish the conservative brand. They confuse and turn off the electorate who end up thinking, 'Well, they're all alike.

Several times he questioned the value of a Republican majority if it consisted of liberal senators.<sup>773</sup> Thus, in sixteen years Limbaugh went from arguing that moderate Republicans provided advantages over Democrats, and could represent a step in the right direction, to arguing that they diluted the conservative brand and should be defeated in primaries.

Conservative hosts' increasingly strident criticism of the votes taken by moderates indicated that ideology played the major role in the growing boldness with which they expressed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>771</sup> Sean Hannity, "Interview With Michelle Malkin," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired September 8, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>772</sup> Sean Hannity, "The Great American Panel," *Hannity*, Fox News, aired September 14, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>773</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "The Limbaugh Rule: Vote for Most Conservative Candidate in Primary," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 14, 2010, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/14/">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/14/</a> the limbaugh rule vote for most conservative candidate in primary.

their opposition to moderates in primary elections. Nonetheless, this change also represented a modified understanding of what was possible. In 2004, only one elected incumbent Republican senator had lost a primary election in the previous twenty-four years. 774 Dating back to World War Two, only thirty-three senators overall, and eight Republicans, had lost primary elections. 775 It seemed unlikely until right before election day that Representative Toomey might beat Senator Specter. Thus, openly supporting Toomey risked antagonizing the powerful soon-to-be Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman. By contrast, in 2010, two Republican senators had already been denied renomination for being insufficiently conservative before talk radio attacked Castle. 776 Additionally, the substantial advancement in web technology, which allowed talk radio to become a more substantial fundraising force, made it that much more possible to defeat an establishment supported moderate. Thus, hosts could seek to unseat moderates confident that they had fairly good prospects for success. They could use their power to move the party in a beneficial direction. This reconceptualized vision of party leadership posed a substantial threat to the survival of moderates.

Hosts newfound intolerance towards moderates also fit with the demands made by the Tea Party movement, which emerged in the spring of 2009. Yet hosts did not change their attitudes in reaction to the Tea Party. Many hosts began shifting their posture towards moderates well before the Tea Party movement coalesced, which might have been a harbinger of the forthcoming movement. Rather, hosts were very good at reading and projecting the feelings of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>774</sup> Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire in 2002, who likely lost because of fear that he could not win the general election. Appointed Kansas Senator Sheila Frahm also lost a primary in 1996.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>775</sup> In fact, at that time, only twenty-five Republican senators had failed to be renominated since popular election of senators began in 1914; This information comes from a chart provided by the Senate Historian's office entitled Incumbent Senators who Lost in their Party's Primary; See also Robert KC Johnson, "Not Many Senators Have Found Themselves In Joe Lieberman's Predicament," *History News Network*, <a href="http://hnn.us/article/28947">http://hnn.us/article/28947</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>776</sup> Senator Robert Bennett (R-UT) and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK).

their audiences, and their newfound stridency might have reflected the frustration and anger that they sensed in their listeners. These sentiments contributed to the formation of the Tea Party. In fact, many hosts promoted and helped to shape the priorities of the nascent Tea Party movement. Additionally, the development of the blogosphere and cable news created the risk that talk radio hosts could be outflanked on their right if they were insufficiently strident. Listeners might then question their authenticity. This information climate also helped to fuel the Tea Party because it pushed the message disseminated by conservative media to the right and increased the level of hyperbole.

Why Talk Radio Is So Dangerous to Moderates

Party and conservative media, writing, "Finally the Tea Party cannot be understood without recognizing the mobilization provided by conservative media hosts who openly espouse and encourage the cause. From Fox News to right-wing radio jocks and bloggers, media impresarios have done a lot to create a sense of shared identity that lets otherwise scattered Tea Partiers get together and feel part of something big and powerful. Media hosts also put out a steady diet of information and misinformation — including highly emotional claims—that keep Tea Party people in a constant state of anger and fear about the direction of the country and the doings of government officials." Skocpol and Williamson saw conservative media as one of the three pilers of the movement. Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12-13; Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj observe that talk radio, more so than the other outrage media, influences Tea Party priorities. Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 165.

My research indicates that the impact of talk radio on an electoral outcome was inversely related to the size of the electorate and the importance of the office.<sup>778</sup> In other words, in presidential general elections, with massive national electorates and two campaigns that each spent a billion dollars trying to define their own candidate and his or her opponent, talk radio had a relatively small impact. At most, talk radio maintained the enthusiasm of a host's listeners for his or her preferred candidate and affected the perceptions of listeners about both candidates and their positions.<sup>779</sup> Especially as technology evolved, in a presidential election, talk radio was, but one medium among many, from which listeners got information about the candidates.

At the opposite end of the electoral spectrum, however, talk radio could have an outsized impact on Republican congressional primaries, especially for seats in the House of

<sup>778</sup> There is much scholarly debate as to whether and how talk radio affects elections. Some scholars have found evidence that talk radio had a substantial electoral impact (See David C. Barker, Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, And American Political Behavior (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)) David Barker, "Rushed Decisions, Political Talk Radio and Voter Choice, 1994-1996," The Journal of Politics 61, no 2 (May 1999): 532-35, Barker and Kathleen Knight, "Political Talk Radio and Public Opinion," the Public Opinion Quarterly 64, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 149-170; Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio, Douglas Muzzio, "Dial in Democracy: Talk Radio and the 1994 Election," Political Science Quarterly 111, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 461-64; 466; 469). Yet, the claim that listening to talk radio motivated someone to vote for a Republican in a general election was both difficult to prove and problematic. Much evidence existed that talk radio audiences consisted predominately of Republicans and/or conservatives. As such, determining causation was very difficult. Was a talk radio listener more likely to vote Republican because talk radio content affected his/her perceptions, or was he/she naturally predisposed to vote Republican and indicating that predisposition by listening to talk radio? Indeed, Diana Owen found that, although talk radio listeners were more disapproving of President Clinton than non-listeners, talk radio did not generate these negative sentiments. Rather, the talk radio audience contained a disproportionate number of people who share characteristics—being Republican, conservative, and/or having voted for someone other than Clinton in 1992 — that made them more disapproving of Clinton. Owen hypothesized that talk radio might have intensified negative feelings towards Clinton, but listening did not create them. Similarly, R. Lance Hobert found no direct relationship between perceptions of fairness regarding the outcome of the 2000 election and political talk radio, though he did find two indirect influences on perceived fairness; R Lance Holbert, "Political Talk Radio, Perceived Fairness, and the Establishment of President George W. Bush's Political Legitimacy," The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics 9, no. 3 (2004): 12-27; Diana Owen, Talk Radio and Evaluations of President Clinton, Political Communication 14, no. 3 (1997): 333-353, DOI: 10.1080/105846097199362. As Jamieson and Cappella wrote, "with more than 80% of it [the talk radio audience] identified as conservative, it is likely to vote Republican... it is unlikely that in a general election he [Limbaugh] increases vote totals for Republicans by directly influencing his listeners;" Jamieson and Cappella, Echo Chamber, 123.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>779</sup> See Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, 134-39; 195-210.

Representatives.<sup>780</sup> These elections featured a small electorate that primarily consisted of the kinds of politically engaged conservatives who were most likely to be talk radio listeners.<sup>781</sup> Indeed, Republican media consultant Chris Mottola related that in his thirty years of looking at survey data in primaries, it was not unusual to find that fifty to sixty percent of the respondents were regular talk radio listeners.<sup>782</sup> Along similar lines, four surveys of the 2004 Pennsylvania Republican primary electorate for Senator Specter's campaign indicated that between twenty-six and thirty-five percent of respondents frequently or sometimes listened to Limbaugh.<sup>783</sup> In every race on which he worked, Mottola considered advertising on conservative talk radio before contemplating other options when trying to reach primary voters, because talk radio allowed a campaign to reach a large percentage of primary voters for relatively little money.<sup>784</sup> The 2004 Toomey campaign placed a significant early ad buy on a radio network that broadcast Limbaugh's show for precisely this reason.<sup>785</sup> Similarly, Senator Robert Bennett (UT) never turned down an opportunity to appear on talk radio because the medium offered a chance to reach a significant slice of the primary electorate for free.<sup>786</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>780</sup> Although Jamieson and Cappella were skeptical that Limbaugh could affect general elections, they believed that he had a much greater chance to affect low turnout primaries. Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 123; See also Sean Wilenz and Julian E. Zelizer, "A Rotten Way to Pick a President," *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>781</sup> Even John Aldrich, who offered a traditional conception of political parties as top down creations of politicians that existed because they provided benefits to ambitious politicians, noted that the nomination process was a crucial venue in which activists pressured politicians to take their extreme views. Aldrich, *Party Decides*, Location 449.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>782</sup> Chris Mottola, Interview with Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>783</sup> This data might understate how much of the primary electorate regularly listened to talk radio for the simple reason that Limbaugh's program aired from 12-3 PM in Pennsylvania, and as such, those voters who had jobs that prevented listening during the work day, but who might have listened to talk radio during their commutes, were excluded from these numbers; The campaign's pollster, Glen Bolger, shared an excerpt from a poll with me in an email on September 16, 2013. The document contained data from earlier polls as well. The document title is "PENNSYLVANIA STATEWIDE MARCH BRUSHFIRE STUDY," and I have pages 277-282 and 287-294.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>784</sup> Mottola, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>785</sup> Mark Dion, Interview With Author, September 17, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>786</sup> Robert Bennett, Interview With Author, January 4, 2013.

Especially in the case of a moderate congressman facing a primary challenge from the right, or a multi-candidate primary with several candidates with low name identification, a talk radio host could significantly affect the outcome. Prominent local hosts, such as Phil Valentine in Nashville, likely had a greater ability to directly motivate listeners to vote for a candidate than the national titans of talk radio.<sup>787</sup> Whereas the local or regional host might discuss a race every day for weeks, the national host would only mention it occasionally. Those few mentions might have significantly boosted fundraising, or even volunteer recruitment, for an underdog candidate, but they likely had a more limited electoral impact.

As one went further down the ballot, the potential impact of talk radio likely grew simply because listeners had less knowledge about the candidates, their opinions were more malleable, and the candidates had less money with which to define themselves and their opponents. In these low salience elections, voters looked for alternative avenues for information about the candidates. Even an extremely knowledgeable voter, such as Democratic strategist Paul Begala, listened to his precinct chairwoman when the county supervisor was up for re-election because he had so little information about the race.<sup>788</sup> Additionally, in primaries, voters did not have party identification as a cue as to which candidate they should support. Talk radio was ideally suited to fill this information vacuum because of its intimacy. Many listeners considered hosts to be their friends. When people did not know much about the candidates running for office, they logically relied on information received from friends or family to shape their perceptions of the candidates

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>787</sup> Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj discuss how local blogs often covered races that national conservative outlets ignored. Local talk radio functioned similarly; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>788</sup> Paul Begala, Interview With Author, November 29, 2012.

(above other potential sources).<sup>789</sup> Thus, when discussing lower profile elections, hosts frequently educated their "friends" about the candidates and motivated them to vote. Especially in right-leaning House districts, talk radio might also have had a similar impact on the rare competitive general election—such as in 1994 when many Democrats, including Speaker Foley, still held Republican leaning seats<sup>790</sup>—because one would imagine that the general electorate in, for example, a sixty-five percent Republican district, had a fairly high percentage of talk radio listeners.<sup>791</sup>

Data limitations made "proving" or quantifying the impact that conservative hosts had on Republican primaries quite difficult.<sup>792</sup> Nonetheless, Jamieson and Cappella and Barker offered evidence that Limbaugh damaged Senator McCain's candidacy in the 2000 presidential primary.<sup>793</sup> Limbaugh biographer Zev Chafets also claimed that conservative hosts destroyed Scozzafava's candidacy.<sup>794</sup> Similarly, anecdotal evidence strongly supported the notion that talk radio could have a substantial impact on congressional primaries. Congressman Castle believed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>789</sup> Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj discussed how much listeners trusted their favorite host. They quoted programmer Robin Bertolucci analogizing between hosts endorsing a product and someone's brother or sister telling them about it. There was a similar effect with candidates; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 109.

<sup>790</sup> Phillip Bump created a chart that shows the large number of Democrats in seats that voted for President Bush in 1992, Phillip Bump, "The remarkable recent decline of split-ticket voting," *The Fix* (blog), The Washington Post, November 10, 2014, <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/10/polarization-and-the-decline-of-split-districts/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/10/polarization-and-the-decline-of-split-districts/</a>; Phillip Bump, "Tweet to Brian Rosenwald," November 10, 2014, <a href="https://twitter.com/pbump/status/531938987166810112">https://twitter.com/pbump/status/531938987166810112</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>791</sup> Bob Shrum, Interview With Author, October 7, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>792</sup> Even what little evidence we have about the impact of talk radio on primaries is limited to presidential primaries, which are not analogous to congressional primaries, because far more is known about the candidates than is typical in congressional primaries. Additionally, in one case, the evidence is in conflict. Jamieson and Cappella provided data that listening to Limbaugh during the 1996 Republican primary resulted in a reduced opinion of Pat Buchanan, who Limbaugh lambasted over his support for protectionist trade policies. By contrast, David A. Jones found that exposure to mainstream news sources reduced people's affinity for Buchanan, whereas listening to Limbaugh's criticism resulted in no increase in Republicans' negative feelings towards him. Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 111-113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>793</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 113-15; Barker, *Rushed to Judgement*, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>794</sup> Chafets, Rush Limbaugh, 193-96

that talk radio played a role in his defeat. One host in Sussex, Delaware vehemently opposed him and did not mind saying so on the air. Sussex was one area of the state in which Castle did poorly (he lost Sussex County 12,041 votes to 6,612, a margin which greatly exceeded his 3,542 vote statewide margin of defeat).<sup>795</sup> Castle's pollster, Dr. Jan van Lohuizen, also believed that talk radio and Fox News deserved the credit for Castle's loss. These media outlets, along with the Tea Party, turned out many people who had not previously voted in Republican primaries. Dr. van Lohuizen asked an open ended question to respondents to one of his primary polls about where they got their information. Those who got their news from talk radio programs supported O'Donnell by a 56.2-43.8 margin; outside of those respondents who received their news from the internet, this was the only group that favored O'Donnell. The respondents who got their information from television, radio news, or newspapers favored Castle by large amounts. However, this result was not statistically meaningful because a mere twenty-one respondents reported getting their news from talk radio. This small sample exemplified one reason that it was difficult to gauge the impact of talk radio on Republican primaries. The electorate tended to be fairly small, and thus it was not cost effective to generate polls sufficiently large to provide a sample size which would be statistically significant. Nonetheless, this result was consistent with what pollsters saw in other surveys— talk radio listeners tended to be more sympathetic to ultra conservative candidates than Republicans who got their news from other media.<sup>796</sup>

This finding fit with what years of political experience taught moderate officeholders.

Representative Sherwood Boehlert believed that because talk radio opposed his stances on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>795</sup> Office of the State Election Commissioner, "State Of Delaware Elections System Official Election Results Primary Elections - 09/14/10: Statewide Office By County With Separate Wilmington Totals," last updated September 14, 2010, <a href="http://elections.delaware.gov/archive/elect10/elect10">http://elections.delaware.gov/archive/elect10/elect10</a> Primary/html/stwoff kwns.shtml.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>796</sup> Jan Van Lohuizen, E-mail Messages to Author, June 8, 2013 and July 31, 2013.

numerous issues, including gun control, abortion, and the minimum wage, the medium energized and encouraged supporters of his conservative primary opponents over the years. Boehlert felt that while the Republican Party writ large viewed talk radio as an ally, moderates did not share this point of view. Rather, they saw talk radio as something that could not be ignored because if a moderate repeatedly opposed talk radio he or she risked prompting a primary challenge.<sup>797</sup> Indeed, Representative Steve LaTourette (R-OH) believed that talk radio spawned primary challenges to moderate Republicans. It provided a platform from which primary challengers could disseminate their message, and it offered cover for aggressive conservative groups, such as the Club For Growth and Heritage Action, that specialized in funding and supporting primary challenges against insufficiently loyal Republicans.<sup>798</sup>

Conservative talk radio posed a dire threat to moderate Republicans (and establishment conservatives) because it negated two of the main advantages of being an incumbent, or having establishment support: a massive fundraising advantage and high name identification.<sup>799</sup> As they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>797</sup> In many ways, in terms of empowering talk radio, or achieving hosts' desired agenda, this perception was far more important than any empirical evidence demonstrating that talk radio affected or did not affect the outcome of primary elections. As R. Douglas Arnold explained "reelection is their [members of Congress] dominant goal. This means simply that legislators will do nothing to advance their other goals if such activities threaten their principal goal." Thus, if Republicans perceived talk radio to have a substantial impact in primaries, they would be wary of crossing talk radio hosts for fear that doing so might result in electoral defeat; R Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>798</sup> Steve LaTourette, Interview With Author, February 12, 2013.

<sup>799</sup> Andrew Hall's research indicated an incumbency funding advantage of roughly twenty-two points. It also indicated that when that advantage was removed, it reduced incumbents' electoral advantage by as much as half. Hall also suggested that boosting challenger spending, which talk radio does, was the main factor in reducing this electoral advantage. Hall revealed that when this advantage was removed, the result was a more ideological legislature. One potential reason for this outcome was that it empowered ideological media and made legislators more wary of crossing them. Andrew B Hall, "How the Public Funding of Elections Increases Candidate Polarization." January 13, 2014, <a href="https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/11481940/Hall-publicfunding.pdf">https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/11481940/Hall-publicfunding.pdf</a>; See also Stephen Ansolabehere and James M. Snyder Jr., "Money and Institutional Power," 77 Texas Law Review, 1673, 1998-1999, which demonstrated that PAC money flowed to incumbents in relation to how much power they wielded. The corollary to their theory was that incumbents wielded far more power than challengers. Interestingly, they also show that PACs donated almost \$50,000 more to House incumbents near the ideological median than they did to extremists.

did for O'Donnell,<sup>800</sup> conservative hosts could significantly boost the fundraising for an underdog, insurgent primary challenger.<sup>801</sup> A mere mention of an insurgent candidate by a syndicated host could tap into a national fundraising network. Even in the Chafee-Laffey primary in 2006, where according to Chafee's pollster Gene Ulm and media consultant Chris Mottola, talk radio did not have a huge direct impact, it helped to generate contributions for Laffey. Every time that Chafee voted against President Bush, which he did frequently as he tried to position himself for reelection, national hosts mentioned the transgression. This discussion helped to drive out of state donors to contribute to Laffey. As a result, only sixteen percent of the individual contributions (accounting for 20.39% of the money donated from individuals) to Laffey's campaign came from within Rhode Island.<sup>802</sup> Hosts similarly boosted hardline challengers against establishment conservatives.<sup>803</sup> For example, Nevada's Sharon Angle, a tea party insurgent, won the Republican nomination to challenge Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid

After O'Donnell won the Delaware Senate primary, Limbaugh encouraged his listeners to donate to her campaign. Their response crashed O'Donnell's website and she raised over \$1 million in twenty-four hours; Rush Limbaugh, "What If Everyone in This Audience Sent Christine O'Donnell a Buck," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 15, 2010, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/15/">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/15/</a> what if everyone in this audience sent christine o donnell a buck; Rush Limbaugh, "Can Christine O'Donnell Raise Another Million in Next 24 Hours," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 16, 2010, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/16/can christine o donnell raise another million in next 24 hours2.">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/09/16/can christine o donnell raise another million in next 24 hours2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>801</sup> The theories of political parties offered by Masket and Bawn et. al. focus on the critical importance of primaries as the mechanism through which ideological activists/interest groups/new style party leaders control political parties. As Bawn et. al. write "But freebooting entrepreneurs [this is a reference to Gary Jacobson's argument that a nomination "is not something to be awarded by the party but rather a prize to be fought over... by freebooting political entrepreneurs"] do not fight with bare knuckles. They need money, door knockers, pollsters, admakers, and much else. Where do they get these resources? Usually from the coalition of interest groups and activists associated with a party in a particular community." Talk radio was ideally suited to provide candidates with these resources; Bawn, et. al., "A Theory of Political Parties," 585; Masket, *No Middle Ground*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>802</sup> With the activity of the Club For Growth and other outside groups, it is impossible to disentangle what percentage of Laffey's out of state fundraising talk radio drove, and what percentage grassroots conservative groups drove. Yet, it was likely that talk radio contributed to this strong out of state fundraising; I calculated these statistics using Laffey's FEC reports for the 2006 election cycle, which can be located using the FEC's searchable "Candidate and Committee Viewer" at <a href="http://www.fec.gov/fecviewer/CandidateCommitteeDetail.do">http://www.fec.gov/fecviewer/CandidateCommitteeDetail.do</a>.

<sup>803</sup> Ulm, Interview With Author.

in 2010 thanks in part to huge fundraising bumps every time she appeared with a conservative media star.<sup>804</sup>

Thus, talk radio provided a challenger with an avenue to raise a sufficient funds to be viable and to prevent the incumbent from defining him or her through paid advertising. As the insurgent candidacy grew, talk radio could provide other benefits, including building enthusiasm among potential volunteers and rallying voters to go to the polls. Crucially, as the case of Mark Souder<sup>805</sup> demonstrated, talk radio provided this aid quietly,<sup>806</sup> allowing the insurgent to construct a viable campaign without alerting a better funded opponent, who, with notice, might have defined the opposition. Additionally, hosts had a chance to shape the race and define the candidates in the minds of their listeners, especially when the candidates were not particularly well known. As a result, increasingly with time, Republicans had trouble winning moderate districts and states, because the kinds of candidates who best competed in those places could not survive primaries against more conservative opponents. Additionally, Republicans from conservative districts became far less willing to compromise in the name of governing because they feared primary challenges fueled by conservative media and grassroots groups, such as the Club for Growth. As a result, the Republican Party moved substantially to the right.

#### **How Moderates React to Talk Radio**

<sup>804</sup> Jordan Gehrke, Interview With Author, August 28, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>805</sup> In 1994, Souder built momentum beneath the radar by appearing daily on talk radio and appearing on cable television outside of the urban center of his district in Fort Wayne. These appearances allowed him to build momentum without his well funded opponent, Congresswoman Jill Long, detecting this momentum; Soulder, e-mail message to author, September 26, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>806</sup> Over time, as the political potential of talk radio became clearer, it became harder to use the medium stealthily because campaigns, especially Republican campaigns, monitored important talk radio programs to at least some degree.

Interestingly, most moderates were little affected by talk radio's polemics against them simply because, unlike many conservative colleagues, they did not listen regularly and rarely knew what talk radio said about them. For example, Congressman Jack Quinn (NY) did not listen to talk radio. He never recalled receiving pressure from talk radio before a vote on a hot button issue, or facing a talk radio inspired backlash after such a vote. In fact, he did not even know that Limbaugh was a critical supporter of the 1993 effort that he undertook with then-Congressman James Inhofe (R-OK) to make the signers of discharge petitions public.<sup>807</sup>

Congressmen Castle and Jim Walsh (NY), and Congresswoman Nancy Johnson (CT) also all reported at most vague awareness of conservative talk radio attempting to pressure them before key votes.<sup>808</sup> Many moderates simply remained indifferent if and when they became aware of talk radio criticism.<sup>809</sup> For example, Senator Hatfield's Chief of Staff, Steve Nousen, recalled that Hatfield did not care what Limbaugh, or any other member of the media, might have thought about his vote on the Balanced Budget Amendment.<sup>810</sup>

Senator Jim Jeffords personified the way in which moderates ignored talk radio. Jeffords understood that conservative talkers and their listeners would not support him. He had one conservative host who actually ran against him in a primary, and subsequently urged people to vote against Jeffords. He and his aides knew that they would lose thirty-thousand votes in a primary, and thus focused on selling Jeffords to other Republicans. Jeffords did not care about

<sup>807 &</sup>quot;Congressional Chronicle-House Leaders Beware: A Loaded Gun," *The Hotline*, October 2, 1993, <a href="http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/congressional-chronicle-house-leaders-beware-a-loaded-gun-19931002?mrefid=site\_search;">http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/congressional-chronicle-house-leaders-beware-a-loaded-gun-19931002?mrefid=site\_search;</a>; Mary Jacoby, "Discharge Bill May Be Gutted Rules Plots Strategy, *Roll Call*, September 13, 1993; Jack Quinn, Interview With Author, February 20, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>808</sup> Nancy Johnson, Interview With Author, August 1, 2013; Mike Castle, Interview With Author, February 7 2013; James Walsh, Interview With Author, March 6, 2013.

<sup>809</sup> Steve LaTourette, Interview With Author, February 12, 2013; Castle, Interview With Author.

<sup>810</sup> Steve Nousen, Interview With Author, August 7, 2013.

his national image, and in liberal Vermont, he won his last few elections in spite of being a Republican, not because of it.<sup>811</sup> Before Jeffords decided how to vote on President George W. Bush's signature tax cuts in 2001, shortly before he left the Republican Party, the White House radio operation put surrogates on Vermont radio to generate calls and host pressure to motivate Jeffords to support the bill.<sup>812</sup> Yet, the senator either ignored, or was unaware of, the pressure, and insisted upon increased special education funding and a smaller tax cut as the conditions for his vote. Senator Jeffords was sufficiently unaware of the attempt to use talk radio to pressure him that it played no role in his decision to switch parties.<sup>813</sup>

Yet, even moderates who did not much care or pay attention to what talk radio hosts said about their votes could indirectly feel pressure from talk radio. When hosts ranted about an issue, they often applied pressure on Republican leaders. Sometimes, hosts attacked the leadership for the failure to pass a bill, or the failure to push for the most conservative possible version of a bill. When the leadership felt pressure, they pushed the moderates who hindered their efforts to relent. Moderates had to pay attention to requests and threats from leadership, because rules changes between the 1970s and 1990s gave leadership substantial power to punish dissidents.<sup>814</sup>

Moderates who ignored leadership pressure could lose committee chairmanships, committee seats, funds for their districts, etc. When moderate members and staffers heard directly about criticism from talk radio, the news often came from family, friends, and acquaintances.

<sup>811</sup> Susan Russ, Interview With Author, August 16, 2013; Senator James Jeffords, *My Declaration of Independence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>812</sup> Taylor Gross, Interview With Author, March 13, 2013.

<sup>813</sup> Russ, Interview With Author, ; Jim Jeffords,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>814</sup> Lunner, Interview with Author; See Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars: Polarization and the Politics of National Policymaking* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006); Julian Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and its Consequences*, 1948-2000 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Unlike insurgent conservatives like Senator Ted Cruz, moderates lacked the sort of national grassroots support that made it politically unpalatable for leadership to punish them.

Representative LaTourette remembered his father once telling him that Limbaugh yelled about a vote he had cast.

Most moderates did appear on radio regularly, but mostly with local hosts and news stations. Representative Tom Davis, both a moderate and former party leader, appeared on Laura Ingraham's program a few times, and generally found that Ingraham wanted to make an example of him.<sup>815</sup> As Davis learned, many hosts saw little value in moderate guests unless they would serve as punching bags. For example, after Representative Shays appeared on Hannity's program to advocate for campaign finance reform, Shays received a phone call informing him that Hannity misrepresented the proposed legislation. Shays called Hannity back and asked to go on the air again to clarify things. Hannity acquiesced, but he never again had Shays as a guest.<sup>816</sup>

Unique among moderates, Senator Specter zealously cultivated conservative talk radio.<sup>817</sup> In addition to regular conference calls with radio hosts (which many other members did), Specter made himself available to conservative hosts throughout Pennsylvania, and he was always prepared to discuss pertinent local issues. Additionally, Specter distinguished himself by always being prepared to go on conservative radio, local or national, to refute accusations against him. He believed that if he did not do so, it was tantamount to accepting the mischaracterization of him and his record. But Specter and his staff also understood that they needed to appeal to conservative talk listeners. Thus, Specter also appeared on conservative radio when he agreed with conservative positions on key issues, including judicial appointments, in an effort to

<sup>815</sup> Tom Davis, Interview With Author, September 10, 2013.

<sup>816</sup> Shays, Interview With Author.

<sup>817</sup> Senator Specter's outreach to talk radio might have derived from the demographic nature of Pennsylvania, which was far more moderate, and had a far larger population of conservatives, than the northeastern states that sent most of the moderates to Congress. Indeed, thirty-two percent of the 600 respondents to a primary poll conducted by Senator Specter's 2004 campaign self-identified as very conservative, while another thirty-five percent identified as somewhat conservative.

cultivate listeners. This outreach might have limited the vitriol with which hosts attacked Specter. Yet, Specter still sparred with hosts on occasion, including Ingraham.<sup>818</sup>

Indicating hosts' power, even moderates proceeded carefully when crossing influential hosts. <sup>819</sup> In 2007, when Governor Schwarzenegger sparred publicly with Limbaugh, he was term limited and California was a very blue state. <sup>820</sup> Yet, Schwarzenegger still called Limbaugh's program to thank him for charitably interpreting derogatory comments that the governor had made about him, and to refute Limbaugh's criticism of his policies. Even as they disagreed over Schwarzenegger's policies, the governor declared, "we'll smoke a stogie together and we'll be talking about this from here to eternity. The key thing is that people should know that you and I, we don't have a fight. We don't argue over those things. We just have different opinions, and, you know, and I am enjoying that because I think the Republican Party has a big tent." <sup>821</sup>

#### Conclusion

Overall, as the 2000s progressed, talk radio hosts shifted away from pragmatism and towards a more rigid ideological posture that demanded that moderate Republicans acquiesce or be purged from the party. Previously, hosts never hesitated to harangue a moderate who voted against their policy preferences, or who otherwise provoked their wrath. Nonetheless, hosts resisted calling for their defeat, and in some cases, argued that their listeners should support imperfect moderates because they were better than the alternative. This transformation had

<sup>818</sup> Scott Hoeflich, Interview with Author, August 13, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>819</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Boston Herald Article On Liberals; Atlanta's Crime Rate; Troubles Within the Republican Party; Liberal Media; Menendez Attorney Leslie Abramson," *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired August 29, 1996 (Multimedia Entertainment), TV Transcript.

<sup>820</sup> Additionally, because he had been born in Austria, Schwarzenegger was ineligible to run for the presidency.

<sup>821 &</sup>quot;EIB Interview: Governor Schwarzenegger Calls Rush," *The Rush Limbaugh Program*, March 21, 2007, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/03/21/eib interview governor schwarzenegger calls rush2">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/03/21/eib interview governor schwarzenegger calls rush2</a>.

complex roots that might have varied by host. Some hosts worried about diluting the Republican brand. Others might have felt as though many moderates were not truly Republicans. Still others might have believed that years of seeing their legislative priorities go unfulfilled, in spite of unified Republican governance, demanded a more strident position. Some hosts might also have felt liberated to call for the purification of the party after Republicans lost control of Congress in 2006. No longer did they have to worry about endangering the Republican majority by calling for the defeat of moderates. Many hosts also might have grown more strident because they sensed that their listeners were becoming more conservative and less willing to countenance dissent. Hosts were very good at reading and reflecting the views of their listeners, and the Tea Party would display this harder edged conservatism as it developed in 2009. Most likely, a combination of these factors contributed to hosts' increased stridency. This stridency, in turn, contributed to the party's growing conservatism.

While most moderates did not pay substantial attention to talk radio, they could not completely ignore what hosts said about them without facing electoral troubles. Hosts possessed the ability to propel a credible primary challenge against a moderate. Additionally, although many moderates hailed from fairly liberal places, if talk radio reduced the number of conservative or Republican votes they received, it could be fatal because they needed every possible Republican vote to overcome hostile terrain. Moderates who did not hail from the liberal northeast, such as Arlen Specter, had to be even more aware of how talk radio treated them because hosts posed an even greater threat to their careers. The ability of talk radio hosts to affect primary elections also made it difficult for conservative or establishment Republicans from conservative locales to cross them by supporting compromise legislation, or legislation opposed by hosts for non-ideological reasons. Doing so risked a primary challenge, and because of the

nature of their districts or states, hosts posed an even greater threat to these Republicans in a primary than they did to moderates. This risk may explain why divided government was so more productive in the 1990s than it has been since 2010—congressional Republicans now worry more about primary elections and charges of selling out than they do about general elections and charges of being a "do nothing" Congress.

#### Republicans and Talk Radio: The Big Picture

Talk radio hosts' attempt to purify the Republican Party, and the way in which even moderate Republicans treaded lightly when they incited hosts' wrath, epitomized the power that hosts had assumed within the party over the last two decades. Although hosts were not elected officials, nor appointed party leaders, they fulfilled many traditional party leadership functions, such as raising money, energizing voters, and attempting to frame events in a manner beneficial to the party and its politicians. Their platform also enabled hosts to assume unique leadership functions, including disseminating incendiary information and news that the mainstream media either did not consider newsworthy, or did not feel comfortable addressing. When talk radio spotlighted these stories, they often forced the mainstream media to address them. Talk radio also provided an outlet for targeting a message to the conservative base without offending moderate voters. Additionally, however, by virtue of being unelected and unappointed leaders, hosts did not feel bound to support the party's candidates, elected officials, and policies when they disagreed with Republicans. Instead, they prioritized their allegiances to their preferred policy agenda, their audience, and their overriding goal of providing entertaining radio. Hosts utilized their freedom to limit the contours of the Republican Party and to demand adherence to their preferred agenda. Those Republicans who ignored this demand risked facing a talk radio fueled primary challenge. In this manner, talk radio hosts embodied a new type of party leader that

came to power over the last fifty years as centralized control of electoral resources diminished, and primary elections provided an arena in which non-elected leaders could exercise power by mobilizing base voters.

Hosts did not assume their role as Republican leaders merely because a power vacuum existed at the end of the George H.W. Bush Administration. Rather, their role developed because of two factors. First, and most importantly, the loyalty of their listeners allowed hosts to rally them behind or against candidates or issue positions. This allegiance made hosts especially potent in Republican primaries, in which voters knew less about the candidates, and conservatives constituted the majority of the electorate. Simultaneously, the reaction of Republican officials, staffers, and strategists to the rise of talk radio helped determine the contours of hosts' place within the party. This interaction provided hosts with valuable information, connections, and guests. Party officials communicated with hosts regularly, all while understanding that the hosts were independent agents with their own goals, who would help only so much as a synergy of purpose existed.

Overall, the relationship between hosts and the party was somewhat of a Faustian bargain. Hosts provided substantial aide to Republican candidates and frequently worked to advance the Republican agenda. But increasingly over time, they demanded a certain level of purity from Republicans that made it far more difficult to be a nationally competitive party and to advance an agenda that would attract the broadest possible support.<sup>822</sup> These demands increasingly made it difficult for moderate Republicans to survive, and made it far more difficult

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>822</sup> In referencing John Aldrich's depictions of the role of activists in the nomination process, Cohen et. al write, "the activists also provide helpful electoral resources, but the resources come at the cost of pressure that limits the flexibility of candidates to take the policy positions that will most please voters." This depiction was limited to elections, but its' general sentiment accurately described the role of talk radio hosts in the Republican coalition; Marty Cohen, Et. Al, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), Location 444.

for Republicans to govern. Establishment conservatives had to fear primaries driven by conservative hosts and grassroots groups with whom they ally, and thus were far more reticent to compromise in order to govern. Additionally, hosts' attraction to the most salacious and outrageous charges against Democrats applied pressure on Republicans to address these issues and to treat them as legitimate. After hearing about the issues on talk radio, the conservative base demanded action. These demands trapped Republicans between their base and independent or moderate voters who believed that the issues and scandals lacked credibility and importance, or who opposed taking action on them. Additionally, these stories delegitimized Presidents Clinton and Obama in the eyes of the Republican base. This sentiment made it harder for conservatives to countenance their party's elected officials compromising with both presidents. Finally, focusing on these scandals or issues also obstructed the Republican agenda by distracting from it, occupying committee and floor time, and driving both Presidents Clinton and Obama towards their base, which made it more difficult for them to compromise as well.<sup>823</sup>

# Sleeping With the Enemy: Democrats and Talk Radio

The relationship between Democrats and talk radio could be analogized to the relationship between a former couple. On its best days, the relationship was cordial and respectful, if wary and distant. Even then, it was clear that the two sides were not enamored with one another. On its worst days, the two sides bitterly attacked each other, often in hyperbolic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>823</sup> This chapter detailed how talk radio hosts contributed to President Clinton's impeachment. Steve Gillon's *The Pact* explained that Clinton and Speaker Gingrich negotiated a framework to reform the entitlement programs. This deal fell apart when discussion of impeaching Clinton began, because both Clinton and Gingrich needed the support of their bases in the impeachment fight, and their proposal promised to anger both bases; Steve M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined A Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

terms. On one level, this relationship was not surprising, given the moderate to liberal nature of most Democrats, and the conservative views espoused by most talk radio hosts. Yet, ideological differences did not preordain this mutual contempt. In fact, talk radio hosts had a financial motivation to maintain, at the very least, a cordial working relationship with Democrats. They prioritized creating the best radio possible. Conflict and debate produced good radio. Thus, it behooved hosts to have Democratic guests on, and to treat them respectfully in order to encourage them to appear again.

Democrats, too, had incentives to maintain good relationships with talk radio hosts.

Agree with them or not, hosts had substantial platforms through which to reach many voters.

Additionally, maintaining a good relationship at least minimized the personal nature of the criticism from hosts, and allowed Democrats to offer listeners a counter-perspective to a host's views. By engaging with the medium, they also reduced the likelihood that listeners would believe the worst charges levied against them. Yet, even as they built a similar outreach infrastructure to that which helped Republicans take advantage of talk radio, Democrats never fully capitalized on the opportunity provided by the medium. While many Democratic leaders understood conservative talk radio's importance politically, much of the rank and file never fully bought in because they did not grasp the potential benefits of cultivating talk radio and the cost of failing to do so.

For purely arithmetic reasons, Democrats never possessed the ability to balance the message disseminated on talk radio. Nor could they fully neutralize the damage that the medium did to their party, or remove the impediment that it posed to implementing their agenda. After all, they never had access to Rush Limbaugh, who appears only to have had one Democratic guest in

his twenty-seven years of national radio.<sup>824</sup> Additionally, even if a conservative host welcomed one Democratic guest per day for a ten minute interview, that segment still only covered roughly eight percent of the host's airtime (excluding commercials). Nonetheless, with more commitment from rank and file Democrats, and a more consistent focus on talk radio from the Clinton administration, Democrats could have better utilized the medium.

They failed to do so for a plethora of reasons. With the advent of the internet in the early 2000s, Democrats found an alternative avenue that offered the key benefit promised by talk radio—circumventing the mainstream media and reaching Americans directly with their message—without necessitating tangling with conservative hosts. Furthermore, many Democrats underestimated the importance of messaging. A skewed perspective of talk radio, fostered by not consuming the medium, compounded this problem. Many Democrats perceived talk radio to be unremittingly hostile, and fretted that appearing as a guest would likely precipitate a screaming match. They failed to see the value in the medium, either because they viewed radio as a secondary or tertiary medium with far less reach than television or major print publications, or because they viewed talk radio as a place in which conservative hosts talked to like-minded listeners who were unlikely to ever vote for a Democrat. While both of the understandings contained grains of truth, Democrats overlooked the medium's potential and cost themselves an opportunity to get their message out to large audiences, who might have been receptive to some Democratic arguments and issue positions. Additionally, by vacating the field, Democrats

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<sup>824</sup> My research indicates that Senator Carl Levin, who appeared on Limbaugh's program in 1994 after Limbaugh criticized a bill that he sponsored, was the only Democratic elected official ever to appear with Limbaugh. If Limbaugh ever hosted another Democratic elected official, his long time Chief of Staff Kit Carson could not remember who it might have been. According to Carson, Levin was the most "prolific" Democrat ever to appear on Limbaugh's program. Christopher Drew, "Pro-GOP Calls Help Kill Lobbying Bill // PERSPECTIVE: Gingrich Succeeds in Inciting Protests Against the Reform Measure," *The Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1994; Kit Carson, Email Message to Author, December 5, 2013.

allowed charges leveled against them on talk radio to stick. The research of scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella suggested that this might have contributed to a talk radio audience with a distorted understanding of Democratic positions and extra motivation to work for Republican candidates.<sup>825</sup>

#### A Natural Fit

Ironically, given this missed opportunity, Bill Clinton was the first party leading politician on either side of the aisle to understand and take advantage of talk radio's political potential. Clinton had done talk radio as governor of Arkansas and he enjoyed the immediacy of the medium. Beach He understood that it provided an avenue to speak to voters unfiltered by the press, and he enjoyed talking calls from voters. Beginning in New Hampshire, in January 1992, Richard Strauss ran the radio outreach operation for Clinton's presidential campaign. Strauss fed soundbites and radio actualities to local stations throughout New Hampshire and the surrounding states. Many of these stations did not have access to a national network feed, and as such, Strauss provided them with their only access to the candidate's message. Stations appreciated Strauss' work, and often called him when he did not initiate contact. This relationship benefitted the stations, which got access to audio from the candidate, and the campaign, which could tailor

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>825</sup> Jamieson and Cappella's survey data from the 1996 presidential election campaign demonstrated that Limbaugh listeners (who largely only heard his conservative perspective because he has no liberal guests) had a more distorted understanding of President Clinton's positions than did listeners to other political talk radio. Unlike Limbaugh, other conservative hosts often had liberal guests at that time. Jamieson and Cappella also found that Limbaugh listeners had more negative emotion towards President Clinton than those listening to other political talk radio. Listeners who reported more emotion about the candidates were more likely to participate in political activities. (Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 135-137 & 199-203).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>826</sup> "Remarks by the President in Interview with Gene Burns of WOR Radio," New York, US Newswire, August 24, 1994.

<sup>827</sup> Richard Strauss, Interview With Author, November 30, 2012

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>828</sup> Campaigns, especially presidential campaigns, had produced actualities for radio stations dating back at least to the 1970s. The Clinton campaign's subsequent utilization of talk radio, however, proved to be far more innovative; Steve Rabinowitz, Interview With Author.

the audio that it disseminated. When stations asked for audio on the various scandals swirling around then-Governor Clinton, Strauss refused, and instead offered them audio on an issue. Strauss and his boss, Jeff Eller uniquely understood the value of getting direct access to voters for Governor Clinton. The campaign invested substantial effort and energy into the radio operation.<sup>829</sup>

Strauss next moved to South Dakota where he booked Governor Clinton on talk radio for the first time. The campaign bought airtime on multiple stations to stage a thirty minute call in show with Clinton. In spite of one question about his purported mistress, Gennifer Flowers, Clinton found the experience to be fantastic, and asked to do more radio because the medium gave him an opportunity to talk to and connect with voters. Additionally, along with other pop cultural forums, such as the Arsenio Hall Show, talk radio proved to be beneficial in the spring of 1992 when the campaign had little money and wanted to tell a story that it did not think that the mainstream media would tell. A successful appearance on the popular *Imus in the Morning* program during the New York primary campaign, after host Don Imus had spent months bashing Clinton, contributed to his winning the crucial primary. After the primaries, Strauss encamped in Little Rock for the last six months of the campaign.

During the general election campaign, Strauss set up a system to pipe President Bush's speeches into headquarters. Immediately after Bush's speeches, Strauss would hold a call with Governor Clinton, or his running mate, Senator Al Gore (TN), where they could refute and comment on the President's remarks. Strauss then disseminated that reaction to stations in the

<sup>829</sup> Richard Strauss, Interview With Author; Jeff Eller, Interview With Author, January 16, 2013.

<sup>830 &</sup>quot;Politics Unusual," Nightline, ABC News, aired September 29, 2004.

<sup>831</sup> Strauss, Interview With Author.

market in which the President had spoken.<sup>832</sup> Clinton and Gore also did a fair number of radio appearances, though the medium was less practical for the principles during the general election campaign when they might be in five cities per day.<sup>833</sup> Additionally, unlike other campaigns, the Clinton team chose to have the candidate do interviews with local television and radio in cities where he was not doing events on a day, instead of doing interviews when he came to town. This practice forced local media to provide coverage of carefully staged events, and allowed the candidate to double back to those markets for interviews later on.<sup>834</sup>

Many of the key players from the campaign joined Clinton's White House communications staff, including Strauss and Eller. The first days of the Clinton Administration provided them with a reminder of the potency and utility of talk radio. The medium was instrumental in forcing Zoe Baird, President Clinton's first nominee to be Attorney General, to withdraw her name from consideration because of scandal. Baird, who made \$507,000 per year, had illegally employed two undocumented aliens for below minimum wage as a nanny and a driver without paying taxes on their wages. Initially, most of official Washington, Republican, Democrat, and journalist, minimized the issue. Orrin Hatch, the ranking Republican member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, called Baird's infraction a "hypertechnical violation." By contrast, average American talk radio listeners considered the violation to be outrageous. They were less likely to know someone with an illegal immigrant working in his or her home than people in official Washington, and they had to find childcare without Baird's half million dollar salary to pay for it. Angry callers flooded the airwaves, and then shifted to calling the White House and senators's offices in droves. Public opinion ran dramatically against Baird, dooming

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>832</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>833</sup> Mark Gearan, Interview With Author, November 6, 2013.

<sup>834</sup> Steve Rabinowitz, June 7, 2013.

her nomination. Talk radio spotlighted the situation, and contributed significantly to Baird's downfall. Subsequently, the press learned that Clinton planned to nominate Judge Kimba Wood for the position. Clinton changed his mind, however, when it became known that Wood had also hired an illegal alien as a nanny in 1986. Unlike Baird, Wood had scrupulously followed the law and she had complied with all tax and registration requirements. Nonetheless, Clinton backed away in part because of concern as to how talk radio, especially Rush Limbaugh, might use the nomination to bludgeon the administration.

In spite of this debacle, Clinton's team perceived an opportunity to harness talk radio's power to advance their agenda. They therefore built the first White House talk radio outreach operation. As the first White House director of radio, Strauss aggressively pitched guests and discussion topics designed to match hosts's interests. For example, Strauss encouraged the administration's drug czar, Lee Brown to appear with Oliver North, who disagreed with the administration on most issues, but whose position towards drugs had much in common with

<sup>835</sup> Benjamin Page and Jason Tannenbaum described how talk radio's reaction to Baird's nomination forced official Washington and the mainstream media to reappraise the nomination. This reappraisal, in turn, generated even more negative sentiment. They noted that callers, more so than hosts, drove the discussion on talk radio. "Zoe Baird, Nannies, and Talk Radio," in *Who Deliberates: Mass Media in Modern Democracy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77-105; "Radio Talk Shows Increasing Influence on Policy," *Morning Edition*, 1130, segment no. 14 (July 16, 1993); Tom Hamburger, "Attorney General Search Says Much About Politics and Washington in '90s" *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*, February 9, 1993; Bob Dart, "Dial-tone Democracy Born of Technology, Talk Shows" *The Austin American Statesman*, February 6, 1993; Elizabeth Kolbert, "The People Are Heard, at Least Those Who Call Talk Radio," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1993; Rod McQueen, "Baird Fiasco Showed Clinton is Listening to Public," *The Financial Times*, January 27, 1993; Jill Lawrence, "Baird Galvanized America // Middle Class Loudly Voiced Displeasure With Nominee," *The Austin American Statesman*, January 24, 1993; Howard Kurtz, "Talk Radio's Early Word On Zoe Baird; Listeners' `Nannygate' Reactions Signaled Trouble for Nominee," *The Washington Post*, January 23, 1993; Lynne Duke and Michael Isikoff, "Baird: Reminder of Populist Outrage," *The Boston Globe*, January 23, 1993; Lynne Duke and Michael Isikoff, "Baird's Illegal Hiring Raises Sharp Debate; Hearings Resume Today on Justice Nominee," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1993.

<sup>836</sup> Howard Fineman, Mark Miller, and Ann McDaniel, "Hillary's Role," Newsweek, February 15, 1993, 18.

Brown's own views.<sup>837</sup> The White House team also targeted local morning shows because they saw an underserved market where they could reach a broad audience.<sup>838</sup> Strauss placed guests on programs with conservative hosts, so long as they were fair, and willing to let administration officials have their say. For more combative hosts, who promised to interrogate guests, Strauss looked to the brawlers on the Clinton team, such as political adviser James Carville.<sup>839</sup>

Strauss also understood that radio's intimacy ideally showcased the president's likability. This intuition led to appearances in which Clinton might only convey a few broad political themes, but also might leave the audience perceiving him to be a regular guy with whom they wanted to have a beer. For example, Clinton did an interview with ESPN Radio in which he discussed his beloved Arkansas Razorbacks's trip to the NCAA basketball Final Four. Strauss understood that these appearances opened an entirely different audience, who might be politically disconnected or opposed to Clinton, to the president's charm. Such exposure increased the possibility that these listeners might give Clinton the benefit of the doubt in the future as he tried to advance his agenda and ran for reelection.<sup>840</sup>

According to Mark Gearan, who served as communications director for part of President Clinton's first term, Rush Limbaugh's increasing prominence and popularity shaped the first of two goals that the White House team had for talk radio. They wanted to expand the medium's ideological spectrum, bolster friendly or less hostile hosts, and convey to both the press and the public that the medium consisted of more than Limbaugh and his ilk.<sup>841</sup> Clinton's aides also

<sup>837</sup> Richard Strauss, Interview With Author.

<sup>838</sup> Jeff Eller, Interview With Author.

<sup>839</sup> Richard Strauss, Interview With Author.

<sup>840</sup> Richard Strauss, Interview With Author.

<sup>841</sup> Mark Gearan, Interview With Author.

hoped to utilize talk radio to circumvent the White House press corps, and speak directly to the public.

The outreach to talk radio went beyond Strauss' operation. Both Gearan and colleague George Stephanapoulos spoke at national radio conventions. Additionally, Gearan chatted frequently with Don Imus, one of the more significant nationally syndicated hosts, and arranged for Imus to interview President Clinton. Ale In a 1994 interview, Stephanopoulos told Talkers Magazine publisher Michael Harrison that the administration believed in radio and wanted to work with hosts. He also made a plea for balance and diversity of opinions on talk radio. Ale Inwo months later, after igniting a firestorm of criticism with comments perceived to be an attack on the medium, Clinton himself sat down with Harrison for an interview. He opined that the ability of people to call into radio talk shows was a "very positive thing for democracy." Expanding on Clinton's views, Stephanapoulos told the 1996 National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts luncheon that the President had been telling him for as long as he had known him that radio was the surest way to reach voters and get ideas into the marketplace.

The White House team also skillfully employed talk radio to produce news. In September 1993, in conjunction with the unveiling of President Clinton's health care plan, the President, the First Lady, the Vice President, and aides briefed two hundred radio talkers on the plan's details.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>842</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>843</sup> Michael Harrison, "George Stephanopoulos Interviewed," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 51 (June 1994): 1 and 10; To my knowledge, this edition is not archived anywhere publicly. Michael Harrison and his staff graciously found a copy in their internal archives for me.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>844</sup> Michael Harrison, "Chief Executive Reaches Out to Talk Radio Exclusive Talkers Magazine Interview President Clinton," *Talkers Magazine*, no. 53 (Early Fall 1994): 6; 13. To my knowledge, this edition is not archived anywhere publicly. Michael Harrison and his staff graciously found a copy in their internal archives for me.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>845</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Talking Back; Radio Hosts Stir Up Fires And Bask in Newfound Glow," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1996.

The Clinton team expected to benefit from the hosts receiving their information about the plan directly from the White House. Two days later, in an unruly scene that reminded Jeff Eller of the bar scene from Star Wars, sixty hosts broadcast live from the White House lawn, with high profile administration officials circulating from table to table for interviews.<sup>846</sup>

The Clinton team wanted to put the most positive spin on the plan for the hosts, many of whom were skeptical. Clinton's aides were mindful of the role that the hosts had played in harpooning Baird's nomination, and fomenting public fury that forced the President to scale back his plan to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military. They hoped that the charm offensive might at least soften the opposition to the health care plan, if not win outright support from many hosts. Phil Tower of WOOD in Grand Rapids Michigan credited the administration for being more aware than any of their predecessors that "image is everything and we're the conduit to the rest of the country."847

The Clinton team also included disc jockeys and morning show hosts, who tended to be less political, thereby allowing Clinton's message to reach a broad swath of listeners. Many of these less political hosts did not ask particularly difficult questions, which allowed the administration's surrogates to communicate their message unfettered. Additionally, inviting radio hosts to the White House created an event, and the press, ranging from the *Associated Press* to NBC News, covered it as such, drawing further attention to the rollout of the health care plan and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>846</sup> Jeff Eller, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>847</sup> Terrance Hunt, "Radio Show Hosts Flock To D.C. Clintons Talk Up Health-Care Plan," *The New Orleans Times Picayune*, September 22, 1993

the White House's message.<sup>848</sup> This sort of echo coverage offered an added benefit to utilizing talk radio.<sup>849</sup>

Overall, Gearan could not think of a single big legislative campaign in which talk radio was not "a staple of the basic architecture of how we'd communicate it."<sup>850</sup> This remained true throughout the first two years of President Clinton's first term. Politically, President Clinton did a substantial radio blitz in advance of the 1994 elections, and by June of 1996, he had appeared on more than one hundred radio shows, while First Lady Hillary Clinton had appeared on more than two hundred. <sup>851</sup> Puzzlingly, the scope and the vision of the talk radio outreach operation diminished progressively during Clinton's time in office.

This diminution carried over to the 1996 reelection campaign, which valued talk radio far less than the 1992 campaign did. Campaign Press Secretary Joe Lockhart did not remember spending much time considering the medium. No progressive talk radio existed with which to really push a message, and the campaign considered conservative talk radio to be a waste of time. Every few days, the campaign's radio coordinator gave Lockhart a list of shows with which he would do interviews. He enjoyed appearing on conservative shows, where he inevitably fielded questions on the conspiracy theory du jour, but he largely felt as though the campaign

Ron Fournier, "Gab Gonzos Take Over White House Lawn," *The Associated Press*, September 23, 1993; Howard Kurtz, Radio "Free America; White House Troops Deliver Health-Care Air Blitz," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1993; Hunt, "Radio Show Hosts Flock To D.C;" "Newscast: Washington Reacts to President Clinton's Speech on Health Care," *NBC News*, September 23, 1993; Thomas Friedman, "Clinton's Health Plan: The President; President Hints at Higher Taxes If Health Plan Savings Fall Short," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1993; Elizabeth Kolbert, "An Open Mike, a Loudmouth Live, and Thou . . ." *The New York Times*, September 26, 1993; Frank J Murray, "Radio Hosts Pitch Tents as White House Pitches Plan," *The Washington Times*, September 24, 1993; Ann Devroy, "It's Show Time Under Clinton's Big Top; White House Has a Circus Aura as Administration Juggles Its Agendas," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1993;

<sup>849</sup> Mark Gearan, Interview With Author.

<sup>850</sup> Mark Gearan, Interview With Author.

<sup>851</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Talking Back."

gained little from these appearances. Even this limited engagement only occurred because the Clinton team perceived talk radio to offer an opportunity to reach the election's key group of persuadable voters: lower to middle class, poor, white, married people. This initiative achieved its purpose if the campaign connected with ten percent of the talk radio audience. Nonetheless, overall, the campaign played defense on talk radio, while having a lot of more positive venues through which to disseminate a message.

A combination of this sense that talk radio offered the campaign little, and the natural differences between running for president and running for re-election as president explained the diminished position of talk radio in the campaign's communications strategy. Running for president involved a significant amount of retail politicking—i.e. speaking to individual voters or reporters—including radio appearances on every type of station imaginable. By contrast, running for re-election required primarily wholesale campaigning—speaking to larger groups, etc. 852

Similarly to the campaign, and in contrast to early in the first term, by the second term, the Administration's vision for talk radio became sharply curtailed. The mechanisms by which the White House communicated with talk radio remained largely the same—Radio Directors Rica Rodman and Megan Moloney utilized the medium strategically as Strauss had done. They continued to have the ability to get presidential time for things—Julianne Corbett Waldron, who worked with Moloney, recalled President Clinton doing radio roundtables with both agricultural and urban radio during her time in the White House. Standard Nonetheless, the centrality of the radio operation to the communications strategy diminished. Whereas in the first term Strauss and his team brought hosts to the White House for the unveiling of the President's signature domestic

<sup>852</sup> Joe Lockhart, Interview With Author, December 10, 2013.

<sup>853</sup> Julianne Corbett Waldron, Interview With Author, November 29, 2012.

policy proposal, in the second term, the radio outreach operation focused on smaller issues, such as procuring interviews with teacher of the year award winners for local radio stations. Moloney also oversaw the creation of a radio actuality line to get audio to smaller and medium sized stations for news reports. Overall, the second term Clinton team did not believe that they could use radio to drive a news cycle.<sup>854</sup> Even Moloney understood talk radio to warrant a lower priority than television in terms of aggressively placing guests on programs.<sup>855</sup>

Personnel changes contributed to the altered orientation of the White House radio operation. The communications staff in the first half of President Clinton's first term, including Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, Gearan, and Stephanopoulos, understood talk radio's importance because they had seen firsthand how the 1992 campaign utilized the medium to its advantage. As new aides without this shared campaign experience filtered into the White House, however, the talk radio operation became somewhat marginalized. These new aides perceived talk radio as intractably hostile and lower in the media hierarchy than mainstream outlets. They focused on the big picture—how best could they drive the media cycle? Over time, these aides also came to believe that White House's needs and talk radio's interests had diverged, rendering the medium even less useful and important.

The road towards marginalization might have begun when Mike McCurry replaced Myers in 1995. McCurry viewed radio as a method for getting regionalized, localized, and targeted content to all news stations.<sup>856</sup> He did not envision the radio operation offering

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>854</sup> Megan Moloney, Interview With Author, February 11, 2013; Mike McCurry, Interview With Author, October 21, 2013; Lockhart, Interview With Author; Don Baer, Interview With Author, November 15, 2013; Loretta Ucelli, Interview With Author, February 28. 2013.

<sup>855</sup> Moloney, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>856</sup> In this regard, McCurry's conception of radio was similar to the understanding of radio held by George HW Bush's communications team.

counterprogramming on national talk radio. He considered Limbaugh to be a nuisance, and understood Limbaugh and his brethren to be preaching to the likeminded. McCurry did not turn his nose up at the radio operation, but he also did little to nurture it, or to integrate it into the broader messaging strategy. Additionally the mid-1990s represented the last days of the old media order where three networks, two wire services, a few major print publications, and CNN had an outsized impact. Thus, McCurry and his colleagues viewed mastering these channels as the key to controlling the national message. To him, these core media were the meat and potatoes, and talk radio represented the gravy—an important side piece, but not worthy of focus.<sup>857</sup>

Similarly, Don Baer, who became Communications Director in 1995, focused primarily on the content of the message, and the best ways to communicate it. Baer wanted to create a coherent overarching set of strategies that worked effectively on all media. Talk radio's impact concerned Baer, but he did little to create a unique strategy for communicating with talk radio. Baer shared McCurry's perception that most talk radio hosts were conservative and unlikely to buy into what Clinton was doing. He made occasional efforts to correct misinformation on talk radio, but did not conduct much outreach, outside of occasionally talking with Michael Harrison from *Talkers Magazine*. Baer's strategy represented an attempt to correct the problems of the first few years of the administration, during which the communications shop innovatively disseminated its message, but the White House lacked a coherent, overarching message that communicated to the public for what President Clinton stood.<sup>858</sup>

Thus, while these superiors did nothing to hamper the work of the White House radio

<sup>857</sup> Mike McCurry, Interview With Author.

<sup>858</sup> Don Baer, Interview With Author.

directors, gradually, this mentality reduced talk radio's importance as a communications medium. By the time that Loretta Ucelli took over as Communications Director in the last two years of Clinton's presidency, the communications shop was less proactive with talk radio than with other media. Staffers filled requests for guests, and dispatched officials to radio to transmit a message, but like McCurry, Ucelli and her team viewed talk radio as a localizing medium, rather than a message moving medium.

President Clinton's frustration with the increasingly conservative direction of talk radio, and its ability to hamstring his administration likely also diminished the excitement within the Administration for the medium. In a June 1994 radio interview, Clinton accused talk radio (and conservative Christian commentators) of utilizing misinformation and demeaning personal attacks to create a culture of cynicism that made governing more difficult. He characterized much of talk radio as being, "a constant unremitting drumbeat of negativism and cynicism." The president lamented that when he got off the air, Limbaugh would have three hours to say whatever he wanted without Clinton being able to respond, or without any sort of a "truth detector." The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing even prompted Clinton to accuse some media

<sup>859</sup> Rica Rodman, E-Mail Message to Author, December 3, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>860</sup> Loretta Ucelli, Interview With Author.

Wetzstein and Ralph Z. Hallow, "Clinton Lashes Out at Religious Conservatives Lambastes Critical Media, Too," *The Washington Times*, June 25, 1994; Harry Levins, "Clinton, Limbaugh Swap Slaps On KMOX," *The St Louis Post Dispatch*, June 25, 1994; Douglas Jehl, "Clinton Calls Show to Assail Press, Falwell and Limbaugh," *The Associated Press*, June 25, 1994; Ann Devroy and Kevin Merida, "Angry President Assails Radio Talk Shows, Press," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1994.

voices of essentially justifying violence through their hateful rhetoric. 862 Clinton did not specifically mention talk radio, and his aides insisted that his critique was broad and not aimed at the medium. Yet, clearly, while Clinton remained a fan of talk radio, he had grown frustrated with the vitriol spewed in his direction.

Additionally, as the scandals surrounding the administration mounted, eventually leading to Clinton's impeachment in December 1998, putting high level administration officials on live radio, especially with a hostile host, became difficult. Ref Doing so, even with an agreement to limit the scope of the questioning to a policy initiative, posed the risk that a host might ignore the agreement and ask about impeachment or the President's sexual life. Ref Even as early as 1996, as scandals related to the Whitewater land deal metastasized, Oliver North lamented that for the first time he was struggling to find Democratic guests to defend the President on his show. On the flip side, their unwillingness to deal with the scandals involving the President, likely reduced

Neckless Speech'; Conservatives Take Offense," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 1995; J. Jennings Moss and George Archibald, "Clinton Lashes Out at `Angry Voices' Radio Hosts Return Barbs in Aftermath of Bombing," *The Washington Times*, April 25, 1995; Bill Nichols, "Aides Soft-Pedal President's `Hate' Remarks // Conservatives not a Target, They Assert," *USA Today*, April 25, 1995; Todd S. Purdum, "Clinton Blames `Loud And Angry' Voices in Media For Spreading Hate," *The Los Angeles Daily News*, April 25, 1995; Michael K. Frisby and Joe Davidson, "Clinton Continues Attack on Hate Speech As Hunt for Bombing Suspect Intensifies," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 1995; John Aloysius Farrell, "Clinton Decries Hate Spread on Airwaves Hints Extremists Fuel Terrorist Acts," *The Boston Globe*, April 25, 1995; Mike Feinsliber, "A New Round of Angry Talk Over Hate Talk and Its Consequences," *The Associated Press*, April 25, 1995; "Newscast: Radio talk show hosts take offense at President Clinton's criticism of hatred on the airwaves," *NBC Nightly News*, aired April 25, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>863</sup> The Democratic National Committee did, however, dispatch numerous guests to discuss the charges against the president and argue against impeachment; Kandie Stroud, Interview With Author, April 8, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>864</sup> Steve Rabinowitz, Interview With Author, June 7, 2013; Mike McCurry, Interview With Author; Jim Kennedy, Interview With Author, December 27, 2013.

<sup>865</sup> Kurtz, "Talking Back."

hosts's interest in receiving administration proffered guests.<sup>866</sup>

The rise of the internet also played a role in the diminishing importance of talk radio in the White House communications plan. Talk radio appealed to Gearan in part because it enabled communications with the public that avoided filtration by the mainstream media. Even in its nascent state in the late 1990s, the internet presented a similar opportunity, without the risk of exposing the messenger to potentially hostile questioning. Thus, several times, President Clinton used the internet to chat with and take questions from citizens.

By 1998, the White House team concluded that devoting substantial energy to talk radio was a waste of time. Joe Lockhart, who replaced McCurry as Press Secretary, and his colleagues believed that many hosts who initially might have been receptive to outreach and offered the President a fair shake had come to understand that hyperbolic criticism of President Clinton offered the best formula for building and maintaining an audience. Despite the robust economy, most of the energy that the communications team devoted to talk radio involved playing defense and putting out brushfires.<sup>869</sup>

Finally, the natural downsizing in the scope of a President's agenda from the first term to the second term also fundamentally changed the communications priorities for the Administration. In Clinton's first two years in office, when his party controlled Congress, he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>866</sup> For hosts, not discussing the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal would have been impractical from a business perspective; it was the lead story in the news and the topic that listeners wanted to discuss. Not asking a guest from the Clinton Administration about the scandal would have diminished hosts in the eyes of their listeners because they would have appeared to have gone easy on the guest or pulled their punches, and many billed themselves as independent truth tellers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>867</sup> Though, of course, the internet allowed Clinton to talk directly with a smaller, different public than the one reached by talk radio. Thus, ideally, the two should have been complimentary.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>868</sup> Loretta Ucelli, Interview With Author, February 28, 2013; Josh Gottheimer, Interview With Author, May 31, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>869</sup> Joe Lockhart, Interview With Author, December 10, 2013.

worked to pass a crime bill, a health care bill, the North American Free Trade Act, and several other major initiatives. By the second term, the scope of Clinton's public<sup>870</sup> agenda diminished, and he focused on trying to come to a budget accord with the hostile Republican Congress.

Downsized initiatives required smaller and more targeted communications campaigns, and the hostility fostered by divided government and impeachment required less persuasion, and more rallying of the president's liberal base.

To some extent, the diminishing attention that the Clinton Administration devoted to talk radio fed a mutually reinforcing cycle. The strident hostility expressed by talk radio drove this reduction. Simultaneously, however, as the administration placed less emphasis on the medium, the message disseminated by talk radio became even more one sided, as listeners no longer received any information to challenge their negative perceptions of the President. This cycle certainly did little to dampen the fervor on talk radio for impeachment.

#### Congress

In contrast to President Clinton, Congressional Democrats reacted slowly and warily to the rise of talk radio. As early as talk radio's successful campaign against a congressional pay raise in 1989, Democratic leaders heaped scorn upon the medium. After the House voted against the pay raise, Representative Vic Fangio lamented, "We fell prey to the deception of the rabble rousers. We became cartoon cannon fodder for trash television and talk radio." Subsequently, as the majority party in Congress in the early 1990s, Democrats did not need alternative media

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>870</sup> I use the term public agenda because, as historian Steve Gillon detailed, Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich actually engaged in secret negotiations to restructure Medicare and Social Security. Steve M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined A Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>871</sup> "Hill Steamed Over Radio's Tea Time: Many in House and Senate Blame Talk Show Host Drive Against Proposed Pay Raise For Turning Public Sentiment Against Plan," *Broadcasting and* Cable, February 13, 1989, 29; Larry Margasak, "Why They Voted For a Pay Hike," *The Associated Press*, February 7, 1989.

like talk radio in order to disseminate a message. Additionally, as House Majority Whip David Bonior explained, House Democrats focused on governing, and over time they had lost sight of the importance of communicating their message to the public.<sup>872</sup>

Furthermore, unlike President Clinton, who had seen first hand during the 1992 campaign how valuable talk radio could be, most Congressional Democrats had little positive experience with the medium. As Rush Limbaugh grew in stature, what little Congressional Democrats knew about talk radio inclined them to think that it was hostile, especially after witnessing Limbaugh contribute to several successful Republican led legislative campaigns in 1993 and 1994.<sup>873</sup>

After the 1994 elections, however, many Democrats concluded that talk radio had contributed significantly to their loss of power. Unlike their Republican counterparts,

Congressional Democrats found the medium's appeal mystifying, but they understood that continuing to cede the platform to Republicans posed substantial political risk. Thus, relatively quickly Congressional Democrats constructed similar infrastructure to that which their Republican counterparts used to interact with talk radio. By the mid to late 1990s, both the Democratic and Republican House caucuses had a communications staffer dedicated to talk radio outreach. In the Senate, both parties built studios to facilitate senators appearing on radio.

Nonetheless, the emphasis placed upon these operations by their respective sides differed substantially. Republicans—many of whom were listeners—authentically and enthusiastically

<sup>872</sup> David Bonior, Interview With Author, February 24, 2014.

<sup>873 &</sup>quot;Congressional Chronicle-House Leaders Beware: A Loaded Gun," *The Hotline*, October 2, 1993, <a href="http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/congressional-chronicle-house-leaders-beware-a-loaded-gun-19931002?mrefid=site\_search;">http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/congressional-chronicle-house-leaders-beware-a-loaded-gun-19931002?mrefid=site\_search;</a> Mary Jacoby, "Discharge Bill May Be Gutted Rules Plots Strategy, *Roll Call*, September 13, 1993; Katherine Q Seelye, "All-Out Strategy Hobbled Lobby Bill," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1994; Jim Drinkard, "GOP Filibuster Sinks Lobbying Bill // Senators Swamped by Faxes, Phone Calls," *The Associated Press*, October 7, 1994; Christopher Drew, "Pro-GOP calls help kill lobbying bill // PERSPECTIVE: Gingrich succeeds in inciting protests against the reform measure," *The Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1994.

embraced the medium. By contrast, Democrats did not have the same conviction behind their efforts. They cautiously reached out to talk radio because they understood that it had become politically important. The two efforts can best be analogized to the way in which a typical child grudgingly eats broccoli because he knows that he must, but gleefully consumes ice cream. Democratic outreach coordinators struggled to convince most rank and file members to engage with the medium. Additionally, unlike Republicans, Democrats did not disseminate talking points to talk radio, and their messaging to the medium lacked sharpness. Overall, Democrats viewed talk radio as merely one of many important channels through which to communicate, and as part of a comprehensive radio strategy that included multiple formats.

#### House

Prior to the 1994 elections, House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt appeared on radio, but he had no one on his staff devoted to radio outreach because talk radio was not a central outlet for him or his caucus. Shortly after Gephardt became House Democratic leader in late 1994,<sup>874</sup> however, he and his staff recognized that to regain the majority, they needed to play more in venues that had not been particularly important previously.<sup>875</sup> Gephardt arranged a briefing for his colleagues on the importance of new interactive media and how to deal with them.<sup>876</sup> Additionally, Gephardt's Communications Director Laura Nichols decided to hire someone with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>874</sup> Speaker Tom Foley (D-WA) lost his bid for reelection, thereby elevating Gephardt to the position of Democratic leader.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>875</sup> With Republican controlled Congress, the national storyline became the battle between the Republican leadership, especially House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and President Clinton. Thus, House Democrats saw their importance, and therefore the mainstream media attention that they received, reduced.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>876</sup> "Politics: Be There or Be Square," *National Journal*, August 3, 1996, <a href="http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/politics-be-there-or-be-square-19960803?">http://www.nationaljournal.com/member/magazine/politics-be-there-or-be-square-19960803?</a> mrefid=site\_search August 3, 1996 square-19960803?

talk radio experience to serve as a booker for House Democrats.<sup>877</sup> In early 1995, she chose Fred Clarke, the producer for nationally syndicated talker Gene Burns. Clarke had only agreed to interview with Gephardt's staff because he wanted to get Democratic guests on Burns's show.<sup>878</sup>

Nonetheless, he arrived for his interview acutely aware that Democrats' problem with talk radio went beyond ideology. He came armed with the information that Republicans sent him every day that made his job easier. He explained that the Republican National Committee (RNC) faxed him a one page document each day with a list of hot issues and guests who could discuss them. By contrast, Clarke only got information from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) when he requested it. Even then, the DNC usually produced a long policy memo that could not be utilized on the air. Democrats' failure to cultivate talk radio, and their inability to understand its language and format made it easier for hosts to employ Republican provided information and welcome Republican guests onto their programs without any attempt at balance.<sup>879</sup>

Clarke set out to change the culture among House Democrats and to help them to become comfortable with talk radio. He also made the lives of his former colleagues easier, quickly setting up a radio actuality line to provide stations with soundbites of House Democrats commenting on topical matters. Clarke also wired a room in the Capitol to be a talk radio cafe, complete with coffee and cookies. He invited hosts to broadcast from this cafe at times when key votes occurred, and he recruited Democratic guests for them.

Many Democrats who had never appeared on talk radio before, or who had appeared infrequently, including Leader Gephardt, proved to be very good at it. Gephardt went from doing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>877</sup> Tom O'Donnell, Interview With Author, November 13, 2013; Laura Nichols, Interview With Author, January 8, 2014; Dan Sallick, December 9, 2013.

<sup>878</sup> Fred Clarke, Interview With Author, October 30, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>879</sup> *Ibid*.

approximately two radio interviews per month outside of his district before 1995 to six to twelve per week in 1995 and 1996.880 Gephardt's appearances set an example, which made it easier for Clarke to recruit other members to appear on shows. He booked members, including Gephardt, on programs hosted by conservatives, as long as the host would treat them respectfully. Clarke also prepared a background book for House press secretaries to increase their comfort level with booking their members on talk radio. Eventually Clarke got permission from Nichols to build a portable radio studio so that hosts could broadcast from the Capitol without having to bring equipment or an engineer. Ironically, this studio placed Democrats ahead of Republicans, who had no such facilities in the Capitol. At times, even very conservative hosts utilized Clarke's equipment. They booked conservative House Republicans as guests, but they also liked hosting the Democratic guests that Clarke provided. Thus, Clarke's outreach paid off, injecting some balance into even these extremely conservative programs.<sup>881</sup>

Clarke's operation initially flourished in part because the most important feedback that members received—from their constituents—started indicating the power of talk radio. Members started to hear constituents parroting Limbaugh's assertions and tropes at town hall meetings. Shortly after Republicans gained control of Congress, David Bonior became the Democratic point person responsible for attacking House Speaker Newt Gingrich daily over ethical lapses. As a result, Limbaugh labeled him the "pit yorkie." Around this time, Bonior attended a labor rally in Decatur, Illinois. Parched after the rally, Bonior went to a local bar, and sat down next to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>880</sup> Howard Kurtz, "Mario Cuomo, The Limbaugh of the Left?; Democrats Hitch Their Hopes to Newest Talk-Radio Host," *The Washington* Post, June 20, 1995; Jennifer Senior, "Dems Mount Talk Show Offensive to Challenge GOP on Home Turf," *The Hill*, April 10, 1996.

<sup>881</sup> Fred Clarke, Interview With Author.

<sup>882</sup> Laura Nichols, Interview With Author.

two blue collar patrons. He heard one patron whisper to the other, "that's the pit yorkie."883

House Democrats also enhanced their substantive messaging operation in the wake of their 1994 electoral disaster, building upon an earlier effort that Gephardt began after his 1988 presidential campaign. 884 Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, who co-chaired the new messaging operation, believed that in order to regain the majority, Democrats needed to utilize all potential avenues to communicate their perspective on issues, including one minute floor speeches, more aggressive outreach to media, and attention grabbing special events. 885 Talk radio events became part of this messaging strategy. For example, Democrats held a media event, including a talk radio blitz, to protest proposed cuts to the school lunch program. 886 They also wore "Save the Children" ties and scarves, employed celebrities to message on the issue, and discussed it on the floor each day. 887 Similarly, on May 17th, 1995, House and Senate Democrats, including Gephardt and Senate Leader Tom Daschle, made coordinated appearances on talk radio shows across the country to discuss proposed Republican budgets cuts and their impact on Medicare. 888

Julianne Corbett Waldron succeeded Clarke as radio coordinator and she continued many of his efforts. Reflecting growing Democratic disenchantment with talk radio, however, she really had to work to convince members and their press secretaries that appearing with right leaning hosts was worthwhile. Bringing hosts in to broadcast from House Democratic facilities allowed her to create relationships between members and hosts, which reduced the wariness that

<sup>883</sup> Bonior, Interview With Author.

<sup>884</sup> Tom O'Donnell, Interview With Author.

<sup>885</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Interview With Author, February 7, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>886</sup> This blitz likely occurred during late February 1995.

<sup>887</sup> DeLauro, Interview With Author; Tom O'Donnell, Interview With Author; David Bonior, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>888</sup> Richard Gephardt, "Congressional Democrats Discuss Medicare Cuts on Talk Radio," News Release, May 17th, 1995.

many members felt towards the medium. Corbett Waldron also hosted war rooms and radio rows<sup>889</sup> in conjunction with President Clinton's State of the Union addresses and big debates, such as the push for a patients' bill of rights. Additionally, she took advantage of members' pet issues and niche radio programs and formats to pair members with hosts. She struggled most to provide guests to major national conservative talkers because of the suspicion that Democrats harbored about such programs. When Sean Hannity<sup>890</sup> wanted to broadcast his show from Gephardt's offices, Corbett Waldron's bosses declined. This case highlighted a larger strategic disagreement between the radio outreach directors and their superiors.<sup>891</sup> Dan Sallick, who was Gephardt's Press Secretary from 1993 to 1997, recalled that Clarke always advocated for more engagement with talk radio. In contrast, more broadly oriented communications staffers sought a path to work around talk radio. To them, the question was less how to equalize the message on talk radio than how to counter-program and how to get their message out to their base.<sup>892</sup>

Corbett Waldron blacklisted hosts who were difficult to work with, and steered clear of hosts who had an agenda that diverged significantly from the message that she was trying to advance. She worked happily, however, with those conservatives, such as Oliver North, who encouraged an open dialogue and allowed guests to freely communicate their opinions. In general, she largely succeeded in filling the requests that she received from national hosts, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>889</sup> War rooms and radio rows were similar, but distinct, events with different strategies behind them. War rooms involved bringing congressmen to a centralized space filled with radio hosts so that they could do interviews on one significant issue. The war room also had ISDN lines and phones so that members could do interviews with hosts in other locations. This effort aimed at getting on as many shows as possible to discuss the spotlighted issue. By contrast, radio rows involved bringing a variety of hosts to the Capitol at a prescheduled time. Hosts liked these events because they could broadcast from a high profile location and talk with high profile guests.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>890</sup> This request likely came before Hannity debuted nationally on September 10th, 2001.

<sup>891</sup> Julianne Corbett Waldron, Interview With Author.

<sup>892</sup> Dan Sallick, Interview With Author.

found them sometimes receptive when she pitched a topic or guest.<sup>893</sup>

Yet, Corbett Waldron saw two striking differences between House Democrats and their Republican counterparts, and between House Democrats and the Clinton White House. 894 She found many members reticent to appear with hosts who might challenge them. By contrast, President Clinton happily appeared with hosts of all ideological stripes. The administration also took care of radio hosts, and talk radio was a vibrant part of its communications strategy. By contrast, too many significant House Democrats dismissed talk radio's importance and wrote the medium off for it be a central promotional avenue. The reduced White House talk radio operation during Corbett Waldron's second term stint at the White House rendered her assessment that much more of an indictment of House Democrats.

Corbett Waldron felt as though her caucus was, by and large, as available to talk radio as Republicans were. However, Republicans "merchandised" their availability better than Democrats did. Radio hosts did not need to call in for taped radio actualities from Republicans because they knew that they could easily get guests live. Thus, Republicans created a greater perception of access than Democrats did, which, in turn, limited Democratic opportunities to use the medium. He was a choed this sentient from a host's perspective. "When you call the average Democrat, they say, 'Who's going to be on the show? What's the subject? Are you going to be taking calls? Hmmmmm, I don't know. And then their aides tell you, 'I can get him on a tarmac on a cellular phone for a couple of minutes before he takes off. But no calls, and he wants

<sup>893</sup> Julianne Corbett Waldron, Interview With Author.

<sup>894</sup> Corbett Waldron worked in the White House from 1997 to 1999 and in the House from 1999 to 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>895</sup> Corbett Waldron's characterization of the White House radio operation does not conflict with the depiction of the progressively diminishing importance of talk radio in the Clinton White House communications strategy earlier in this chapter. Rather, it indicated the robust state of the talk radio operation early in the Clinton presidency.

<sup>896</sup> Julianne Corbett Waldron, Interview With Author.

to talk about this transportation bill that's coming up.'"897 Corbett Waldron also felt as though her time was more divided and less focused than her Republican counterpart's time.

Corbett Waldron's successor, Kimberlin Love, also found most rank and file House

Democrats leery of appearing on right leaning radio programs. Most members were not up to
sparring with the hosts. While Love found most hosts, including conservative ones, to be
respectful, she had a hard time convincing members that hosts with whom they disagreed would
treat them with respect, especially if they lacked familiarity with the hosts. The Democratic
leadership understood the importance of the medium and frequently integrated radio into their
communications plans, but the rank and file only really bought in right before Love departed the
House. She believed that Republicans had an advantage on the medium, both because they were
more organized and systematic about using talk radio to disseminate a message, and also because
hosts shared their ideological predilections. This ideological sympathy allowed Republican
guests to appear without having to engage in combat messaging. 898

The increasing difficulty described by Corbett Waldron, and Love in getting Democrats to appear on conservative talk radio had two causes. First, according to Congresswoman DeLauro, failing to recapture the House in 1996 or 1998 disheartened many members. As such, they started questioning the messaging strategy and got tired of the intense push to do media. See Second, as Laura Nichols noted, it became increasingly difficult over time to convince Democrats, including Gephardt, that attempting to have a rational conversation with conservative hosts remained worth the effort. They felt as though they never received a fair hearing.

<sup>897</sup> Micha L Sifry, "A kick-ass liberal. (Tom Leykis)," The Nation 260, no. 14 (April 10, 1995).

<sup>898</sup> Kimberlin Love, Interview With Author, February 26, 2013.

<sup>899</sup> DeLauro, Interview With Author.

<sup>900</sup> Nichols, Interview With Author.

After Nancy Pelosi replaced Gephardt as the House Democratic Leader in 2002, Russ Kelley assumed control over talk radio outreach. Kelley had little trouble filling requests from hosts for guests; he had more trouble getting hosts to accept the guests and address the topics that he pitched. Unlike senators, many rank and file House members had a sufficiently low profile that hosts did not necessarily want them as guests. Kelley often found himself agreeing to let hosts ask about one topic if they would also ask about a topic important to House Democrats as well. Although he rarely pitched the most right wing hosts, when they requested guests, Kelley had a small cadre of members who he could deploy to their shows.

Like his predecessors, Kelley noticed a cultural gap between the parties. Republicans did not necessarily deploy more resources towards talk radio than Democrats. Yet, talk radio was embedded more centrally in the Republican culture than in the Democratic culture. Kelly had fewer members who were willing to go on talk radio and fewer programs that wanted Democratic guests than his Republican counterparts. Often he found himself trying to explain a show to a member. Kelley, whose tenure coincided with an increase in liberal radio shows, also believed that it was easier for Republicans to disseminate their message on talk radio partly because Republicans and conservative media figures did a far better job at arriving at a unified, coordinated message. Liberal hosts, by contrast, were not necessarily team players. Frequently

<sup>901</sup> Russ Kelley, Interview With Author, May 1 and May 3, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>902</sup> The lack of requests from hosts for guests might have stemmed from hosts giving up on the possibility of getting Democratic guests, given the difficulty in recruiting them. Alternatively, it might reflect talk radio's drift further to the right in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as more and more stations became built around a conservative talk theme.

when Kelly pitched a liberal host, he heard that the topic did not fit into the day's show plans. 903

Overall, Kelley felt as though Democrats liked the idea of talk radio far more than they actually liked appearing on the medium. They felt as though they should be utilizing the medium, and they wanted to do it, but they did not have a clearly stated goal, nor a clear path to achieve that goal. Democrats's devotion to talk radio outreach was akin to a person genuinely intending to pursue a New Year's resolution to lose weight, while lacking the longer term commitment necessary to join a gym and stick with exercising long enough to achieve the goal.<sup>904</sup>

When Andrea Purse succeeded Kelley in 2006, she found most members reticent to do talk radio outside of National Public Radio. She also discovered that local shows tended to book members through their own press secretaries. Purse provided training for press aides on how to build a radio list and how to prepare a member to appear on the air. Additionally, Purse and her boss Brendan Daly, hosted a new direction radio day right before the 2006 elections, which involved House Democrats doing more than eighty radio interviews on a blend of news radio, talk radio, and African American radio outlets. Purse also hosted a radio row right after Pelosi became Speaker of the House. The volume of interest from members in her training sessions and the radio rows pleasantly surprised Purse. Members had an appetite to do more radio than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>903</sup> Interestingly, many conservative hosts were no more interested in being team players than liberal hosts. All hosts cared primarily about producing the best radio show possible, and their political goals were secondary. However, given the ideological disparity in talk radio, Republican staffers likely struggled less to find a significant national host willing to discuss a proffered topic. Additionally, because hosts had a longer term working relationship with Republican elected officials and their aides, they might have been more willing to fit a topic or a guest in.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>904</sup> Russ Kelley, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>905</sup> Andrea Purse, Interview With Author, May 9, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>906</sup> "Pelosi: House Democrats Hit the Airwaves for New Direction Radio Day," news release, *US Newswire*, November 1, 2006.

expected. In fact, as the 2000s progressed it actually became easier to recruit Democratic members to appear on conservative talk radio because younger members, such as Chris Van Hollen (MD) and Debbie Wasserman Schultz (FL), enjoyed engaging and sparring with hostile hosts more than many of their more senior counterparts. 907 Additionally, Pelosi's communications operation also utilized liberal radio to strike back and aggressively disseminate a message after the format developed in 2004.

Despite this uptick, the cultural gulf observed by Corbett Waldron, Love, Kelley, and Purse persisted. Most Democratic members did not listen to talk radio, and they perceived it to be a fairly insignificant medium (in the broader media landscape) consisting primarily of Republican cheerleaders preaching to the converted. Many communications strategists and Democratic members believed that they could not match Rush Limbaugh's power, and that Democrats could gain little by devoting attention to these entrenched opponents. Democrats wanted to engage with the medium, but they also openly sought to create equal weight elsewhere on the airwaves, whether that involved news radio appearances, local television appearances, etc. The House Democratic talk radio strategy might be more appropriately labeled a radio strategy that involved talk radio and other spoken word formats where strategists felt as though they had a better chance to get their message out. Additionally, to risk adverse members and their aides, it made little sense to risk a confrontational radio appearance outside of the member's district, which offered little potential political benefit. As talk radio grew increasingly conservative during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and new technologies and media, including the internet, offered alternative means of messaging, members became even less inclined to aggressively court talk radio.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>907</sup> Brendan Daly, Interview With Author; Kimberlin Love, Interview With Author.

#### Senate

On the other side of the Capitol, the relationship between Senate Democrats and talk radio unfolded similarly. Senate Democrats aggressively engaged with talk radio for a time in the late 1990s (though this period occurred slightly after the high point of House Democratic outreach). Subsequently, however, they soured on the medium, as senators tired of the abuse that they received, and shied away from potentially confrontational appearances. A small cadre of senators understood the potential gains from interacting with talk radio, and appeared regularly; otherwise most senators preferred only to talk with home state hosts. Unlike their counterparts in the House, Senate Democratic leaders actively worked to aid the developing liberal radio operations in the early 2000s, but the rank and file's ambivalence towards talk radio even extended to liberal hosts, who also threatened potentially difficult interviews. Overall, talk radio constituted one of many media through which Senate Democrats worked to disseminate a message.

When Tom Daschle became Democratic Senate Leader in 1995, he and his staff realized that they were a beat or two behind Republicans in utilizing radio. They also understood that it would no longer suffice for senators to communicate with their constituents through recordings. Radio now reached listeners through more than just top of the hour newscasts, and thus offered the opportunity for two-way communication. Daschle also perceived the need to use local television and radio to circumvent the national media. Therefore, he and his staff set out to upgrade their technical facilities to enhance senators's ability to communicate with their constituents in real time, including building a radio studio. Additionally, the Senate Democratic Technology and Communications Committee hired radio producer Roger Lotz to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>908</sup> Tom Daschle, Interview With Author, April 19, 2013; Laura Quinn, Interview With Author, December 12, 2012.

provide technical expertise. Lotz aided various senators in their use of radio, through tasks ranging from compiling a bible of potential stations and shows for Senator Patty Murray, to starting his Friday mornings at 5:30 or 6 AM to help Senator Carl Levin with appearances on radio morning programs throughout Michigan. Lotz also began using ISDN lines and a website to distribute and post audio clips.<sup>909</sup>

Lotz found that many senators had a real learning curve when it came to talk radio.

Initially, he had no chance of convincing them (or their protective press secretaries) to appear on conservative talk programs. Lotz's boss, Laura Quinn, recalled that at first, most senators viewed the medium as hot and hostile. Senator Daschle believed that his colleagues were reticent to engage the medium because it had to be proven to them that they could succeed on talk radio.

Quinn and Lotz worked to convince senators that if they sat for interviews, most hosts would be polite and respectful, even if they disagreed. By 1997, some senators had gotten used to the medium and gladly took on hosts from across the ideological spectrum.

More broadly, senators engaged with talk radio to varying degrees. Some senators, such as Senator Murray, proactively reached out to the medium. Others, including California Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein, did radio and prepared thoroughly, but they were more reactive. Senator Byron Dorgan appeared on conservative talk programs because he believed that talk radio needed alternative voices on. 912

Senator Joe Lieberman was perhaps the biggest Senate Democratic champion of talk radio. Dating back to his 1982 race for Connecticut Attorney General, Lieberman understood the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>909</sup> Roger Lotz, Interview With Author, September 18, 2012.

<sup>910</sup> Roger Lotz, Interview With Author; Laura Quinn, Interview With Author; Tom Daschle, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>911</sup> Lotz, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>912</sup> Byron Dorgan, Interview With Author, May 13, 2013.

value of radio as a medium for communicating with his constituents. Radio, unlike television, allowed Lieberman to speak expansively about issues to a large audience in a conversational format. Hosts across the political spectrum welcomed him on to their programs because he was a good guest. Lieberman did talk radio weekly, and even spoke at a national radio convention. At one point early in his Senate career, one of Don Imus's producers attempted to book Lieberman. Deputy Press Secretary Kathie Scarrah did not know who Imus was, and turned the booking down. Imus blasted Lieberman on the air and accused the senator of thinking that he was too good for Imus's show. This criticism got back to the senator, who informed staff that he wanted to go on with Imus. Subsequently, he became a frequent Imus guest, and unofficially hosted Imus when he broadcast from Washington. The senator also appeared with many conservative hosts, including Sean Hannity. During Glenn Beck's shock jock days in New Haven, Lieberman would stop by with lox and bagels when he was campaigning. Such appearances reflected the friendly reception that Lieberman received from conservative radio, his comfort with the medium, and Lieberman's respect for his conservative supporters.

Not every senator would appear on rough and tumble conservative programs like Lieberman or Dorgan, but Laura Quinn knew that hosts treated senators who would not appear even more poorly than other Democrats. Similarly, she refused to blacklist conservative hosts because abstaining from a show left its airwaves without the Democratic message. Thus, Quinn understood that she had to find surrogates for those programs, especially if they were in key markets. Her outreach program focused as much, or more, on local radio as it did on national radio, as it intended to sell senators in their home markets. Additionally, Quinn worked to put the

<sup>913</sup> More so than other liberals, Lieberman had support from across the political spectrum; Kathie Scarrah, Interview With Author, January 20, 2014; Jim Kennedy, Interview With Author, December 27, 2014.

best spokesperson for the party on an issue on the air. Initially, she fielded more requests, but over time, her job became more pitching topics and guests to hosts, most of whom were receptive if she offered a smart and credible guest on a hot topic.<sup>914</sup>

Daschle and Dorgan<sup>915</sup> also emphasized trying to get their side heard on talk radio. Over time, they found that they had great success disseminating a Democratic message utilizing the infrastructure that they had created, but experienced far more mixed results using the channels provided by the market. As such, they entered into a conversation about trying to create an alternative to conservative talk. They brought local hosts to Washington to discuss the possibility of building national liberal radio, and Daschle began calling stations to encourage them to provide more balanced programming.<sup>916</sup> These efforts helped to get Democracy Radio off the ground, but given the mixed track record of liberal radio this achievement represented a limited triumph<sup>917</sup>

The frustration that bred Daschle and Dorgan's efforts to construct liberal radio also led to Senate Democratic outreach to conservative radio outlets waning after Quinn and Lotz left the Technology and Communications Committee. When Russ Kelley became the Committee's radio director in December 2000, his job consisted far more of providing technical assistance in producing radio actualities for senators than booking them on talk radio. Democratic senators had grown weary of being beaten up on talk shows, and had little appetite for appearing on the programs. As the effort to build liberal radio bore fruit, Kelley's focus shifted more to booking

<sup>914</sup> Laura Quinn, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>915</sup> Dorgan chaired the Democratic Policy Committee, and partnered with Daschle in the effort to address the power of talk radio.

<sup>916</sup> Byron Dorgan, Interview With Author; Tom Daschle, Interview With Author.

<sup>917</sup> Dorgan, Interview With Author.

Democratic senators with liberal hosts.

Liberal radio presented opportunities for some senators who would not appear on conservative talk. Senator Ted Kennedy served as conservative radio's favorite liberal bogeyman. Thus, when Laura Burton Capps worked as his communications director, she saw no potential benefit to putting him on conservative radio. While Kennedy was an accomplished debater, such appearances would only drive conservative fundraising. Yet, whenever Kennedy unveiled a new initiative, Burton Capps booked him on a combination of liberal radio, National Public Radio, Tavis Smiley, and ethnic radio.

Yet, even with liberal shows, Kelly struggled to convince senators that they would be benefit from appearing on anything but national and home state programs. He had some success with shows such as Mitch Albom's in Detroit, because Albom had a degree of name recognition from authoring the wildly popular *Tuesdays with Morrie* and his program aired via syndication in some other markets. But even a regional show with a big audience offered little appeal to senators from a different part of the country.<sup>920</sup>

By the time that Raul Martinez took over the radio operation in 2003, his job had reverted to more of a technical role. Very little of it involved pitching hosts or receiving requests for guests. Additionally, Martinez received instructions only to pitch friendly outlets. Thus, in the four years after Quinn left the committee, the Democratic caucus lost interest in trying to communicate their message on conservative programs. Occasionally, when relevant issues arose, Martinez pitched senators to African American or Hispanic radio, as their staffs had fewer

<sup>918</sup> Russ Kelley, Interview With Author.

<sup>919</sup> Laura Burton Capps, Interview With Author, February 21, 2014.

<sup>920</sup> Kelley, Interview With Author.

relationships with hosts and producers on these outlets than they did with local talkers in their senator's state. As Democracy Radio and Air America launched in 2004, Martinez partook in a meeting with press secretaries to encourage them to put their senators on liberal radio and to give liberal hosts the benefit of the doubt in an effort to try to enhance the possibility that the projects thrived. He also coordinated the broadcasts of some, usually progressive, talk shows from the Senate Democratic radio studio.<sup>921</sup>

Many senators frequently appeared with talk outlets in their states. Local hosts treated many senators, especially those senators from smaller states, including Daschle and Mark Pryor (D-AR), with a certain level of respect, even when they disagreed with them. In many cases, local hosts had met the senators, which reduced the likelihood that criticism would be disrespectful. For example, Senator Max Cleland (D-GA) liked chatting with conservative Georgia talkers Neal Boortz and Martha Zoller, because he was personally fond of Boortz, and Zoller would engage in a fair conversation. 922 Senators also especially liked appearing on local apolitical radio shows. Rodell Mollineau who worked for Daschle, Pryor, and Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) noted that Pryor's most important appearances came on local morning programs and sports shows where he could discuss college football. These conversations reached more listeners and painted a picture of a likable senator to whom listeners might relate. 923

When Reid replaced Daschle as the Senate Democratic Leader in 2005, talk radio fit into his vision for communications, which entailed Democrats circumventing the national press corps and communicating with outlets in their respective states. Some senators, including Debbie

<sup>921</sup> Raúl Martinez, Interview With Author, May 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>922</sup> Jamal Simmons, Interview With Author, November 25, 2013.

<sup>923</sup> Rodell Mollineau, Interview With Author, October 24, 2013.

Stabenow (D-MI) and Dorgan, pushed hard for a greater caucus wide presence on talk radio with minimal success. Many senators were no more comfortable interacting with the emergent liberal radio outlets than they were dueling with their conservative counterparts. Many of the liberal hosts were extreme liberals who denounced some of the votes that Democratic senators had cast on security and intelligence issues, which presented the potential for contentious conversations.

As a result, when Reid and his aides made a pitch for senators to do national talk radio, only ten to fifteen would respond. In addition to this aversion to conflict, Reid's Senior Communications Adviser Jim Manley felt like senators found radio less attractive than television because radio appearances typically did not result in newspaper quotes, or any sort of "echo" press coverage, and they provided senators with less "feedback" than television appearances did. Nonetheless, whenever a big bill was on the floor, the media plan designated a senator to book talk radio. Hosts were eager to hear from Reid's communications war room and asked to be on the fax distribution list. 924

Similar to Daschle, Gephardt, and Pelosi, Reid did everything personally that he could do to encourage members of his caucus to utilize talk radio and set an example himself. Reid did not do a ton of media, but he did try to talk with national liberal hosts, such as Randi Rhodes and Stephanie Miller, as often as possible. Additionally, against Manley's advice, Reid also appeared with several right wing hosts in Nevada semi-regularly because the former boxer in him enjoyed the sparring. 925

Yet, even for Dashcle and Reid, talk radio was more of a secondary communications outlet than a primary one. Daschle viewed talk radio as an important method for disseminating a

<sup>924</sup> Jim Manley, Interview With Author, July 22, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>925</sup> *Ibid*.

message, but only one of a dozen such important methods. Similarly, Rodell Mollineau, who focused on long term message development and strategy for Reid's staff, described talk radio as a method for amplifying a message—thus it was not the central means of disseminating the message. Reflecting these priorities, eighty-five percent of the dealings that Reid's staff had with talk radio consisted of fielding requests from hosts and producers.

Overall, similar to House members, most rank and file Democratic senators approached talk radio warily, and preferred to appear primarily in their own states. In this regard, however, they were also similar to many Senate Republicans. Like their House counterparts, the Democratic leadership exhibited significant commitment to talk radio outreach, and actually attempted to help build liberal radio networks in the early 2000s. Nonetheless, unlike Congressional Republicans, they did not conceive of talk radio as a central communications medium. Although they conducted significant outreach to conservative radio in the late 1990s, this outreach waned as conservative hosts became more strident, and alternatives, including liberal radio and the internet, developed.

### **DNC**

Similar to Congressional Democrats, the DNC realized after the 1994 elections that Democrats had to neutralize talk radio if they wanted to recapture Congress in 1996 and re-elect President Clinton. As such, Jon-Christopher Bua initiated the DNC talk radio program.

Concluding that finding a liberal host with Limbaugh's talent to be a "silver bullet," would be difficult Bua and his aides elected instead to train surrogates to help get the Democratic message

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>926</sup> Tom Daschle, Interview With Author.

onto talk radio.<sup>927</sup> The DNC operation targeted electorally competitive districts and states, with a focus on the 1996 presidential election. Bua and his deputy, Bill Endicott, called stations and asked if they would be willing to put Democratic guests on. The DNC proffered guests to any station who responded affirmatively.<sup>928</sup>

Bua, a former speech coach and off-Broadway theater director, created a training manual and trained thousands of Democratic officials and non-elected Democratic surrogates. Surrogates who were not party functionaries could appeal to people who liked the Democratic message, but did not like the messenger. These surrogates included small business owners, teachers, and others who could speak credibly on a specific issue. Guests went through three hour training sessions that included a mock talk radio interview. Overall, Bua and Endicott wanted to train a cadre of feisty and entertaining surrogates who would be invited back on radio shows, large and small. Bua perceived little risk to putting his surrogates on talk radio, especially on small local radio stations where they could not really make a big mistake. 929

Initially, Bua and Endicott did not expect to get their surrogates onto the biggest national radio programs because those shows all leaned to the right. As such, they wanted to compensate for that gap by putting guests on even more small shows. However, they read that Oliver North had a lot of independent listeners. After hearing North discussing Bosnia, they ascertained that he would host a guest for a debate, trained a surrogate, and watched him destroy North in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>927</sup> Jon Christopher Bua, Interview With Author, July 16, 2012; Bill Endicott, Interview With Author, September 11, 2012; Geoff Gettinger, Interview With Author, February 13, 2013; "Politics: Be There or Be Square," *National Journal*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>928</sup> Jon Christopher Bua, Interview With Author; Bill Endicott, Interview With Author; Geoff Gettinger, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>929</sup> Unlike in the mid-1990s, today that understanding might not be true, as a statement made on a small station could be on a blog within 5 minutes, and from there, it might receive coverage from larger media outlets; Jon Christopher Bua, Interview With Author, July 16, 2012; Bill Endicott, Interview With Author, September 11, 2012.

debate. Endicott remembered thinking that North would never accept another guest from him. Surprisingly, he accepted several other guests, at which point, Endicott asked him why he so willingly welcomed DNC provided guests. North explained that the debates lit up all of his phone lines and generated an interesting show. While North's producer labeled Bua a "pain in the neck sometimes," he thought that giving Democrats some stake in the talk radio debate made for better radio. The DNC team had a similar experience with G. Gordon Liddy. Although working with conservative hosts produced some blowback, Bua and Endicott felt as though these shows had sufficiently large audiences that they were worth doing even if only one-third of the audience consisted of independent or persuadable voters.

The DNC effort waned a bit after President Clinton's reelection in 1996. Endicott replaced Bua briefly in 1997, before ceding to Kandie Stroud, who brought stability to the talk radio operation for nine years. The program accelerated dramatically during the debate over impeaching President Clinton. Stroud went from arranging a few interviews per day to setting up fifty to one hundred per day. She never left a request unfilled, regardless of the host's ideological perspective. During Terry McAuliffe's chairmanship [between 2001 and 2005], Stroud frequently put him on the air with major conservative talkers, including Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham. Over time, the radio interviews that Stroud arranged became more narrowly targeted. If the DNC Chairman traveled to Wisconsin, Stroud set up interviews for him throughout that state.

The Democrats' handling of talk radio at their quadrennial national convention

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>930</sup> Amanda Thompson, "Democrats Training Callers For Assault On Talk Radio," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 28, 1996.

<sup>931</sup> Bua, Interview With Author; Endicott, Interview With Author.

<sup>932</sup> Kandie Stroud, Interview With Author, April 8, 2013.

demonstrated how they lagged behind their Republican counterparts in terms of integrating talk radio into their communications strategy. The talk radio setup at the 1996 convention closely resembled the daily talk radio program run by Bua and Endicott in scope. 933 Subsequently, the operation grew exponentially (By contrast, the jump in the size of the radio operation at the Republican convention radio operation occurred between 1992 and 1996). 934 In 2000, Stroud brought a staff of sixty to the convention to help coordinate bookings for radio row. In 2004, she had three shifts of staff starting at 4:30 AM to help book 250 shows. The hosts occupied two floors in the arena and those who were located on the floor close to Congressional Democrats got great guests, whereas those on the other floor grumbled about difficulty recruiting top notch guests. McAuliffe, however, roamed radio row for much of the convention; he even invited Neal Boortz to his suite for a drink, much to the consternation of liberal hosts. 935 In 2004, Stroud also took a team of surrogates to the Republican Convention in an effort to impede the Republicans from getting their message out in an unfettered manner.

The talk radio outreach effort at the Democratic convention demonstrated the disparity between the two parties when it came to talk radio. The effort was substantial and well run. Yet, talk radio simply occupied a lower priority for Democrats than it did for Republicans. In 2000, for example, the Republican counter programming team arrived on radio row at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles at 3 AM, in order to provide guests to east coast morning shows.<sup>936</sup> By contrast, the Democrats started providing guests at 6 AM.<sup>937</sup> Similarly, in 2004, hosts

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>933</sup> Jon Christopher Bua, Interview With Author; Bill Endicott, Interview With Author; Geoff Gettinger, Interview With Author.

<sup>934</sup> Scott Hogensen, Interview With Author, September 7, 2012.

<sup>935 &</sup>quot;Talk Hosts Flock to DNC in Boston," Talkers Magazine, no. 151 (September 2004): 3, 14, 18, 37.

<sup>936</sup> Mark Pfeifle, Interview With Author, January 16, 2013.

<sup>937</sup> Kandie Stroud, Interview With Author.

believed that the Republicans offered more high profile guests at their convention than the Democrats did. 938

#### **Campaigns**

This disparity also existed with regards to campaign outreach to talk radio. Democratic campaigns engaged talk radio, but, in most instances, on nowhere near the level that their Republican counterparts did. In advance of the 2000 presidential election, Vice President Al Gore focused on a potential primary campaign against former Senator Bill Bradley (NJ). As such, he did very little conservative radio outside of the early primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire. Instead Gore devoted his attention to NPR and American Urban Radio Networks in order to target liberal and moderate primary voters. 939

As the campaign shifted to the general election, talk radio's importance increased. The campaign had communications staffers in forty states who worked with talk radio hosts in the same manner in which they engaged other members of the press. This operation endeavored to generate as much coverage of the campaign as possible without using Vice President Gore or his running mate, Senator Lieberman. Gore and Lieberman did often appear on radio before and/or after they had an event in a city, in an effort to drive turnout to the appearance and bracket it with news and events. The campaign put guests on conservative radio shows whose hosts were reasonable. Indeed, Deputy Communications Director Jamal Simmons understood that suburban moderates often listened to conservative talk radio for entertainment. Nonetheless, much of the campaign's utilization of radio focused on news radio, African American radio, and some local

<sup>938</sup> Ellen Ratner, "Talk hosts invade RNC in NYC," Talkers Magazine, no. 152 (October 2004): 3, 18, & 20-21.

<sup>939</sup> One exception to the general reticence of Democrats to appear on conservative talk programs came in Iowa and New Hampshire during presidential contests when, because of the small nature of the states, candidates appeared on as many media outlets as possible.

Latino radio stations.

Gore's aides felt that these other media offered far greater bang for their buck than talk radio (their focus on African American and Latino radio made sense, as the audience constituted one element of the Democratic base). Talk radio, by contrast, represented a "bank shot" to the Gore team, which explained its' low priority outside of the swing states. In swing states, however, the Gore team did engage the medium. 940 Bua took leave from his government job to spend the last few weeks of the campaign in the battleground state of Tennessee booking Democratic surrogates on radio. Though it proved to be too little, too late, Bua remembered campaign polling improving by three to four points once this focus on radio began. 941 The campaign perceived most of the talk radio audience to be intractably hostile to Gore. As such, they focused on talking to and winning over ten to twenty percent of the listeners. The Gore team attempted to change the conversation on talk radio from the culture fight that the Bush team preferred to have to the economic "proof points" that their polling showed would reach these independent voters.

In 2004, John Kerry's team similarly approached radio. The campaign felt as though they lacked friendly places on talk radio where they could have an expansive conversation about policy. Thus, like the Gore campaign, Kerry's team targeted most of its radio messaging efforts towards African American/urban radio and Latino radio. Again, Kerry did do a fair amount of talk and news radio in Iowa during the primary. His Iowa Press Secretary, Laura Burton Capps, felt as though he appreciated the convenience of being able to do radio from the car between

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>940</sup> Jano Cabrera, Interview With Author, November 12, 2013; Jamal Simmons, Interview With Author, November 25, 20313.

<sup>941</sup> Bua, Interview With Author.

appearances.<sup>942</sup> During the fall, however, the Kerry team primarily endeavored to use political talk radio for get out the vote efforts.

Nonetheless, the campaign booked surrogates on radio platforms ranging from music radio to conservative talk. Debra DeShong directed the campaign's satellite television and radio surrogate operation. Her team reserved conservative talk radio for verbal brawlers, including DeShong herself, and former Senator Max Cleland, who could fend off an attack and pivot to the campaign's message. Hoffman, who ran the broader surrogate operation for the campaign, and DeShong worked to match guests to stations. Often times, for more conservative venues, Hoffman proposed a conservative Democrat or a Republican surrogate. The candidate himself made some targeted and regional radio appearances, typically on music stations, where the questions were likely to be friendly. Indeed, Burton Capps often put Kerry on radio to help promote his message and his appearances in the six competitive western states where she directed communications. Rarely, however, did she put Kerry on talk radio, because engaging in a debate threatened to muddy the campaign's message.

The campaign left requests from small stations in non-targeted states unfilled because these stations lacked sufficient reach to break or advance stories in the way that the campaign needed. Accordingly, it made little sense to utilize limited surrogate resources on them.

<sup>942</sup> Burton Capps, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>943</sup> In 2000 and 2004, the Gore and Kerry campaigns outsourced their satellite television and radio booking operation to a company called QRS. The QRS operatives worked in the same buildings as the campaign staff, and the impact of outsourcing the booking operations appeared to be negligible; Debra DeShong Reed, Interview With Author, June 19, 2013.

<sup>944</sup> Debra DeShong Reed, Interview With Author.

<sup>945</sup> Gail Hoffman, Interview With Author, July 10, 2013.

<sup>946</sup> Debra DeShong Reed, Interview With Author.

<sup>947</sup> Laura Burton Capps, Interview With Author.

DeShong's team also worked closely with Kandie Stroud and took advantage of the DNC's technical capacity. In 2004, unlike 2000, several nationally syndicated liberal talk radio programs existed, including a full daily slate of shows provided by Air America. Yet, the DNC and Kerry campaign staff understood that although Air America offered a great platform for disseminating the campaign's message, it had very limited reach. In light of Air America's relatively low listenership, it made no sense to prioritize outreach to the network.

### The Benefits of Appearing On Talk Radio

Democrats who took a chance and appeared on talk radio found the experience to be beneficial. At the very least, most conservative hosts treated guests respectfully, even if discussions often grew heated. Bill Richardson, who served as a Congressman, Cabinet Secretary, Ambassador, and Governor, understood the power of talk radio because it was highly popular in the rural areas of his home state of New Mexico. Richardson believed that Democratic consultants thought that putting Democrats on talk radio only stirred up the opposition. By contrast, he felt as though increased dialogue engendered respect from some ideological opponents. This respect, in turn, might accord Democrats the benefit of the doubt on a vote. Ongresswoman DeLauro also placed critical importance on Democrats appearing on talk radio and utilizing facts, not just rhetoric, to challenge accusations that hosts made against them. Such a response provided listeners with an alternative perspective and helped to prevent charges from sticking. Sin Richardson believed that the medium treated him better than other Democrats because of his willingness to appear. He even had hosts, including Oliver North, rebuke callers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>948</sup> DeShong, Interview With Author; Stroud, Interview With Author.

<sup>949</sup> Bill Richardson, Interview With Author, February 13, 2013.

<sup>950</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Interview With Author.

who treated him rudely. Some pugilistic Democrats even enjoyed contentious conversations with hosts. For example, in 1996, conservative host Marc Davis explained to *National Journal* that the two or three times that he had Democratic strategist James Carville as a guest, they had "beaten each other to a pulp. And we've loved it."

Ironically, Democrats who refused to appear on talk radio in order to avoid confrontational encounters actually exposed themselves to far more ridicule from the medium than those Democrats who appeared regularly. Like Richardson, Senator Lieberman enjoyed talk radio and hosts appreciated his willingness to appear. Jano Cabrera, who was Lieberman's Communications Director during his 2004 presidential campaign, recalled that almost every time Lieberman appeared on talk radio, the host introduced him by mentioning that while he disagreed with Lieberman on many issues, Lieberman was a Democrat who was willing to listen to common sense ideas and cross party lines. This warm introduction came in spite of Lieberman having yearly American Conservative Union scores of zero in 2003 and 2004, a lifetime score of seventeen, and a DW Nominate score of -.251954

Two years later, when Lieberman faced a strong, and eventually successful, primary challenge from anti-war activist Ned Lamont, talk radio star Sean Hannity opined that Lieberman was a good man, and lamented that his praise would probably hurt Lieberman. Hannity considered one of Lamont's biggest weapons to be that Liberman got along with him and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>951</sup> Bill Richardson, Interview With Author.

<sup>952 &</sup>quot;Politics: Be There or Be Square," National Journal.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>953</sup> Jim Kennedy, Interview With Author; Jano Cabrera, Interview With Author; Kathie Scarrah, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>954</sup> American Conservative Union, "Federal Legislative Ratings," <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?year1=2004&chamber=13&state1=0&sortable=1">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?year1=2004&chamber=13&state1=0&sortable=1</a>, accessed June 3, 2015; Royce Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores."

appeared on his show.<sup>955</sup> Hannity explained that he liked Lieberman because "he represents a level of civility and decency. He's the last of the John F. Kennedy Democrats. Scoop Jackson. Guys who understand the need for homeland security and national security." Hannity made clear that he disagreed with Lieberman on ninety percent of the issues, but he qualified that disagreement by noting that he liked and respected the senator, who was a man of honor and integrity.<sup>956</sup>

Congressman Gary Ackerman (D-NY) received similar plaudits from Hannity during a 2002 show. Ackerman shared similarities with Lieberman—both agreed with Hannity on issues related to Israel, Iraq, and national security that he believed to be of paramount import.

Nonetheless, like Lieberman, Ackerman possessed a liberal voting record, with a career ACU score of four and a DW Nominate score of -.373.957 Yet, as Ackerman prepared to depart after several segments debating issues with Hannity and Congressman JD Hayworth (R-AZ), Hannity lavished him with praise. "Gary Ackerman is a guy, we have had shootouts on taxes, on Democratic policy, but when it comes to Israel, but when it comes to police officers, when it comes to the war in Iraq, Gary, I've gotta tell you, you've been Hannitized. No honestly, you are a man of intellectual honesty and integrity and I appreciate the fact." Hannity warned Ackerman, "you know if I endorse you any more, you're going to get defeated by a Democrat in your district who is going to say even Hannity likes him." Before letting Ackerman go, Hannity

<sup>956</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>955</sup> Sean Hannity, "The Sean Hannity Show," August 4, 2006 accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>.

<sup>957</sup> Royce Carol, Et. Al, "DW-NOMINATE Scores;" American Conservative Union, "Federal Legislative Ratings," <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">http://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">https://acuratings.conservative.org/acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?">https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/?</a> <a href="https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/">https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/</a> <a href="https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/">https://acu-federal-legislative-ratings/</a>?

reiterated that he was both a Democrat and a great guy.<sup>958</sup> Many Democrats accumulated similar voting records without receiving this sort of generous characterization from talk radio hosts.

By contrast, hosts denigrated Democrats who refused invitations to appear. During an aside about support for police, Hannity contrasted his praise of Ackerman with criticism of Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) because, "There are a lot of liberal Dems, a lot of Congressmen, that refuse to come on this show. Hillary Clinton will never come on this show because she really isn't a person that has the courage of her convictions. So what she does is she goes out there in friendly media territory and she'll only do, she'll do media interviews only with people that like her and only if they agree to a certain set of questions ahead of time." Hannity's comments supported Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (D-CO), who observed that hosts did not respect Democrats who refused to come on their shows to defend their beliefs.

Yet, even some talented Democratic communicators, including Schroeder herself, often hesitated to appear on talk radio for reasons beyond avoiding verbal fisticuffs. Fred Clarke considered Schroeder to be one of his biggest talk radio stars. Yet, Schroeder believed the medium to be a significant contributor to a decline in civility in politics, and found it to be artificial. She preferred only to appear in studio with hosts. She also refused to appear with prominent conservative hosts Michael Reagan and G. Gordon Liddy, because Reagan falsely accused her of not knowing the words to the Pledge of Allegiance, and because Liddy's success bothered her, given his checkered pasts. <sup>960</sup> She had similar qualms about Oliver North, and

<sup>958</sup> Sean Hannity, "The Sean Hannity Show," August 20, 2002, recorded by *The Paley Center for the Media*, Catalog Number RB:26220, <a href="http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22Sean+Hannity">http://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=%22Sean+Hannity</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>%22&f=title&c=all&advanced=1&p=1&item=RB:26220</u>, accessed at the *Paley Center's* New York branch.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>959</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>960</sup> Clarke, Interview With Author; Schroeder, Interview With Author; "Politics: Be There or Be Square," *National Journal*.

forced him to court her before she would appear with him (he responded by sending her flowers and chocolates).

Similarly, Byron Dorgan understood the political importance of talk radio as well as any Democrat, and appeared on conservative programs, including Scott Hennan's popular show in his home state of North Dakota. Yet, over time, Dorgan reduced his conservative radio appearances because he found so much of the content to be devoid of thoughtfulness and facts. 961 While these principled stands might be admirable, strategically, they were short sighted, because the fewer Democrats willing to appear on talk radio, the more listeners only received a conservative message. Additionally, as Congresswoman DeLauro explained, when Democrats failed to respond to charges levied against them every day on talk radio, the accusations stuck. David Bonior lamented that the failure to do more talk radio left a segment of the population not knowing for what Democrats stood. 962

### Why Democrats Never Fully Embraced Talk Radio

For practical reasons, Democrats were never likely to fall head over heels for talk radio. Hosts generally leaned right, which made disseminating a message more difficult. Additionally, increasingly as the years progressed, the audience for talk radio generally leaned right as well, which meant that listeners were not the audience that Democrats wished to target. Moreover, a cultural impediment typically existed that further reduced the likelihood that Democrats would embrace the medium. Many Republicans listened to talk radio. In the mid-1990s, House Speaker Newt Gingrich even spontaneously called Limbaugh several times after hearing him discuss a topic that Gingrich felt required his input. By contrast, most Democrats did not listen to the

<sup>961</sup> Byron Dorgan, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>962</sup> Rosa DeLauro, Interview With Author; David Bonior, Interview With Author.

medium. Consequently, they suffered from a tendency to underestimate its reach and importance (David Bonior argued that many of his peers saw radio as the "red headed step child of media"), and to exaggerate the medium's hostility.<sup>963</sup>

Additionally, two groups of Democrats resisted pleas to do more media. One group was uncomfortable making media appearances' the second saw them either as a waste of time, or as cheapening their legislative work. As Congresswoman DeLauro noted, while both groups might be excellent legislators, these members did an insufficient amount of media in the best of times. Going on talk radio required a "junkyard dog" mentality, and many of DeLauro's colleagues did not go to Congress to engage in such hostile communication. Congressman Bonior found that many Democrats thought that their constituents elected them solely to govern, and they failed to understand the connection between reaching the public with a message, and gaining and maintaining the power necessary to govern. These members scorned the messaging work of Bonior, Schroeder, and DeLauro, perceiving them to be "showhorses," and not legislative workhorses. 964 Schroeder retired in 1997 in part because she believed that the Democrats would be out of power for a while because so many of her colleagues did not understand the importance of messaging. 965

The development of the internet and the expansion of cable television also contributed to Democrats never fully embracing talk radio. Most Democratic strategists and staffers never viewed outreach to talk radio and the internet as mutually exclusive. Even after Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign demonstrated the internet's fundraising potential, Democrats's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>963</sup> David Bonior, Interview With Author; See also Chapter 3, footnote 185.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>964</sup> David Bonior, Interview With Author; Patricia Schroeder, Interview With Author; Rose DeLauro, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>965</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Interview With Author.

investment in the internet, did not end outreach to talk radio. Nonetheless, the internet provided an alternative outlet that lessened the need to invest maximum effort into talk radio outreach. Additionally, talk radio's primary attraction for Democrats had been its ability to enable them to target a message to local audiences and to circumvent the mainstream media and speak directly and interactively with Americans. Over time, the internet promised to fill both of those functions, especially the latter. Simultaneously, right as the internet took off in the late 1990s, the utility of talk radio for achieving these goals declined. Between 1998 and 2001, as more talk shows became nationally syndicated, talk radio programming became both more conservative and less useful as a conduit to target a message to local audiences. In many places, nationally syndicated shows filled the majority of the programming day.

Further, prior to the development of the internet, radio had been the only interactive medium. By President Clinton's final State of the Union address, however, he took questions from the public via the internet after delivering the speech. The President also did a live internet town hall, and became the first president to Christmas shop on the internet. House in conjunctions Director Don Baer conducted an internet chat from the White House in conjunction with the launch of MSNBC. Unlike talk radio, no host directed this contact between Democrats and citizens. Rather, the internet completed the progression, begun with talk radio, towards politicians employing new media to reach voters with completely unfiltered messages.

With regard to the House of Representatives, the internet also allowed for better targeting a House district; whereas a radio show might reach parts of five districts, but no more than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>966</sup> Loretta Ucelli, Interview With Author; Josh Gottheimer, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>967</sup> Baer, Interview With Author.

twenty-five percent of any of them, as technology advanced in the second half of the 2000s, internet messaging could be targeted more specifically. Additionally, as Karina Newton, who directed internet for Speaker Pelosi, noted, the internet also facilitated greater use of concrete metrics. When a member of Congress appeared on talk radio, all his or her staff knew was roughly how many people were in the audience, and how many, if any, calls or letters the appearance might have generated. By contrast, staffers could track how many times people viewed a youtube video or liked a Facebook post. 968

Finally, especially as Air America floundered and eventually failed, Jamal Simmons noticed that the left began to identify talk radio as infertile ground. As such, liberals shifted resources and energy towards the internet, where they could more effectively get their ideas out. A blogger conference or a conference call produced a far better response than a talk radio call; as such, Democrats focused more on the former when devising communications strategies. Haura Nichols explained that as time passed, Democratic staffers and strategists concluded that cable television and social media offered a larger audience than talk radio because liberal radio lacked sufficient reach, and conservative radio exhibited such hostility. Pro

Yet the internet also offered a cautionary tale about trying to over read the causes of the disparity in how the two parties utilized talk radio. It would be easy to assume that Democrats, tired of being punching bags, and sensing that they would never cut into the Republican advantage on the medium, embraced the emerging internet as a place where they could get a jump on Republicans. In reality, it took significant time for Democrats to understand the internet's potential and feel comfortable utilizing it. Ari Rabin Havt, who worked on internet

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>968</sup> Karina Newton, Interview With Author, April 30, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>969</sup> Jamal Simmons, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>970</sup> Laura Nichols, Interview With Author.

outreach for Senator Reid, as well as on the internet and blogging team for the Kerry campaign, recounted that many Democrats had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the medium. 

Karina Newton recalled having to educate members about the internet and its potential exactly as Fred Clarke, Roger Lotz and Laura Quinn had to educate members about the contours and potential benefits of talk radio. It took most politicians, staffers, and consultants a long time even to experiment with the internet's potential usages in politics, and an even longer time to build the necessary infrastructure and integrate the internet into communications operations. In reality, much of the energy and the enthusiasm on the left for exploring the political possibilities of the internet came from grassroots groups and bloggers—much like conservative talk radio, the liberal blogosphere developed organically without a push from the political establishment. 

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Even after Howard Dean raised large sums of money for his campaign online and generated significant grassroots support, the Kerry campaign primarily viewed the medium as one for fundraising, not particularly for engaging people or for getting out the vote. <sup>973</sup> More broadly, rarely did generally risk adverse politicians and consultants embrace new and untested media with which they lacked familiarity. The importance of the internet in the development of Democrats' complicated relationship with talk radio must be qualified by this understanding. <sup>974</sup>

Some Democrats failed to fully embrace talk radio for the same reason many politicians delayed in utilizing the internet. Politicians gravitated towards and were more comfortable with

<sup>971</sup> Ari Rabin Havt, Interview With Author, June 13, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>972</sup> For more on the role that the internet played in liberal grassroots organizing see David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>973</sup> Gail Hoffman, Interview With Author; Ari-Rabin Havt, Interview With Author; For a description of the Dean campaign's internet operation and how it contributed to subsequent Democratic usage of the internet, see Daniel Kreiss, *Taking Our Country Back: The Crafting of Networked Politics From Howard Dean to Barack Obama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>974</sup> Gail Hoffman, Interview With Author.

media that they consumed themselves. Thus, Republicans took to talk radio more quickly, because, especially after 1994, they were listeners. Those Democratic members who listened to NPR, or to a particular local talker, willingly and eagerly engaged the medium. For example, Leader Pelosi appeared regularly on Ronn Owens' legendary radio program on KGO in San Francisco. Tonsuming a medium provided a politician with a more accurate perception of its importance and reach, and it demystified the medium. Failure to consume talk radio left Democrats with the mistaken impression that hosts were likely to turn an interview into a screaming match where they could not get a word in edgewise. This misperception left little incentive to aggressively court the medium, especially considering members's packed schedules and natural affinity for radio's more glamorous media sibling, television. As a result, Democratic members vastly preferred to appear on television—which they believed offered greater visibility and less hostility.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, many rank and file Democrats were never going to embrace talk radio because they perceived the medium to be implacably hostile. Leadership understood talk radio's importance, directed outreach, and engaged with the medium. Nonetheless, even the leadership lacked the natural affinity for talk radio that their Republican counterparts felt. They struggled to fully conceptualize the necessity, and the potential benefits of flooding the airwaves with prominent Democratic guests and sharing a Democratic message with hosts in a form that would make their job easier. A geographic element also contributed to the awkward fit between

<sup>975</sup> Brendan Daly, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>976</sup> Laura Quinn, Interview With Author; Kimberlin Love, Interview With Author; Julianne Corbett Waldron, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>977</sup> Jim Manley, Interview With Author; Ari Rabin-Havt, Interview With Author; Andrea Purse, Interview With Author.

Democrats and talk radio. Many Democrats came from urban districts or states, in which talk radio might not have been as significant an element in the fabric of living as it was in rural states. 978 Senator Daschle noted that in his native South Dakota, many people spent long hours listening to talk radio as a way to pass time spent on rural highways. Perhaps because of this cultural gap, even the Democratic leadership viewed talk radio as one of many tools for communicating, as opposed to being a central communications priority. Fairly hardened "red and blue" thinking also might have contributed to this understanding. As Debra DeShong recalled, before targeting increased in sophistication in the second half of the 2000s, Democratic campaigns, including the Kerry campaign, ignored conservative leaning shows in low-priority places, because staffers perceived that these shows did not reach their target voters. As understandings of targeting improved, 979 however, Democrats started realizing that their voters might tune into such a show because the host cared about an issue that they valued, which might offer an opportunity for a candidate inclined to address that issue.

Even with increased targeting, however, one must be realistic when comparing

Democratic and Republican talk radio outreach. Talk radio occupied a far more significant place
in the Republican communications strategy, in part because talk radio needed to serve a larger
function for Republicans than it did for Democrats. Both sides saw the medium as important for
disseminating and amplifying a message. But Republicans also used it to communicate with and
take the pulse of their base. Liberal talk radio never had a sufficient listenership to allow

Democrats to use the medium in this way. They used talk radio more defensively—hoping to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>978</sup> While most major cities had robust talk radio stations, they also had many more media options, and talk radio thrived more with people stuck in traffic during their commutes, which members presumably avoided because they spent most of their time in Washington.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>979</sup> See Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013) for a history of the development of targeting and microtargeting.

ensure that radio listeners heard both sides of the story, as opposed to hearing an entirely anti-Democratic message. In electoral terms, talk radio presented Democrats with an opportunity to reach a much smaller potential pool of voters who might be open to voting for their candidates than Republicans. As such, they sensibly allocated their limited resources accordingly, and devoted more attention to media that offered access to larger groups of persuadable or supportive voters.

Nonetheless, after 1995, Democrats missed an opportunity to balance the message that talk radio listeners received. Though conservatives constituted much of talk radio's audience, it offered access to many persuadable voters and Democrats might even have benefitted from reaching conservative listeners who voted reliably Republican. By strongly providing their take on issues to hosts and offering more guests to contest conservative claims, Democrats could have muddied the waters factually for conservative listeners, who typically parroted talk radio derived talking points about Democrats and their policy positions. Additionally, by challenging more visceral claims, Democrats could have reduced the personal animosity that many talk radio listeners felt towards them. Rather than vitriol, Democrats might have faced respectful disagreement, a la the treatment received by Senator Lieberman. This increased respect might have reduced listeners's political activity. Jamieson and Cappella demonstrated that Limbaugh listeners who reported more emotion about the candidates in the 1996 election were more likely to participate in political activities near the election. 980

Additionally, Bill Richardson believed that Democrats' lack of aggressiveness in cultivating talk radio, and the unwillingness of many Democrats to appear on the medium represented a lost opportunity to reach a lot of moderate and rural Americans. Many aspects of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>980</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 136-137.

the Democratic agenda would appeal to these Americans, who get their news and entertainment from talk radio. By not balancing the conversation more on talk radio, Democrats gave the opposition a lot of free time to sell their agenda. This failure might have increased the chances that the audience accepted Republican claims.<sup>981</sup> This disparity also might have contributed to Democrats' growing lack of competitiveness in rural places.

Talk radio also offered potential benefits unrelated to the impact on the audience. Tom O'Donnell recalled that during Senator Sherrod Brown's (D-OH) 2006 Senate campaign, Brown did two to three morning drive radio shows each day. These appearances helped Brown to crystalize his message to voters—what the campaign was about and how Brown wished to express this purpose—and this fine-tuning enabled Brown to do a tremendous job of connecting with voters and staying on message in the last few months before election day. 982

Even optimal outreach would not have transformed talk radio into a friendly medium. While many conservative hosts would have welcomed information from Democrats and happily hosted Democratic guests, they still fundamentally disagreed with Democrats on most major issues. Additionally, while the vast majority of conservative hosts treated Democratic guests with respect, that did not stop them from being harshly critical. Furthermore, because they strove to entertain, airing criticism in a flamboyant manner, with panache, made sense. Finally, as conservatives dominated the audience for conservative talk radio, there was a limit as to how much benefit greater outreach would have provided in terms of selling the public on a Democratic message and/or winning the backing of an increased number of voters.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>981</sup> Jamieson and Cappella's findings suggest that during the 2004 presidential campaign, audiences for Fox News and Rush Limbaugh were more likely to accept Republican claims and reject Democratic ones. It makes sense that as talk radio broadcast an increasingly imbalanced message, only discussing Democratic positions to ridicule them, a similar pattern might emerge. See *Echo Chamber*, 190-236.

<sup>982</sup> Tom O'Donnell, Interview With Author.

## The Some People's Voice: Talk Radio and Public Policy

Talk radio could affect policy and the legislative process even when it was not at the peak of its influence. At 5:53 AM on Saturday November, 22, 2003, the House of Representatives approved legislation adding a prescription drug benefit and an element of private competition (Medicare Advantage) to Medicare. The bill only passed after the House leadership held a fifteen minute vote open for an extraordinary and highly unusual two hours and fifty-three minutes to round up enough votes to triumph. For more than two hours the vote stood frozen at 216 in favor and 218 against. The complex legislation had generated opposition from across the ideological spectrum. Many stalwart conservative Republicans opposed the bill, in spite of arm twisting and pleading from the House Republican leadership, Heath and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, and President Bush. Talk radio loathed this legislation (even the original House bill, which subsequently became less conservative in a House-Senate conference committee). Many hosts inveighed against the legislation for months, as did many conservative interest groups. 983

<sup>983</sup> Michael Stokke, Interview With Author, July 2, 2014; John Feehery, Interview With Author, May 2, 2013; Brett Shogren, Interview With Author, February 23, 2015; "Night Of House Drama Yields A Narrow Medicare Victory," Congress Daily/AM, November 24, 2003; David Espo, "GOP Leaders Coax Their Own Conservative Lawmakers to Support Medicare Bill," Associated Press Newswires, November 20, 2003; David S. Broder, "GOP: Masters Of the Grand Finale," The Washington Post, November 21, 2003, Final, A45; Ceci Connolly, "Drugmakers Protect Their Turf; Medicare Bill Represents Success for Pharmaceutical Lobby," The Washington Post, November 21, 2003, Final, A04; Marilyn Werber Serafini, "No Cure-All," National Journal, November 22, 2003; Amy Goldstein and Helen Dewar, "House Set to Vote on Drug Bill; Senators May Begin Debating Medicare Measure Today," The Washington Post, November 22, 2003, Final A09; James Kuhnhenn, "Medicare Showdown in House; With Drug Coverage and a Bigger Role for Private Insurers, the Bill Faced a Close Vote Last Night," The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 22, 2003, City-D, A04; Susan Milligan, "Seniors' Drug Bill Survives in House GOP's Late Moves Win Changes in Medicare," The Boston Globe, November 23, 2003; David S. Broder, "Time Was GOP's Ally On the Vote," The Washington Post, November 23, 2003, Final A01; Robert Pear and Robin Toner, "Sharply Split, House Passes Broad Medicare Overhaul; Forceful Lobbying By Bush," The New York Times, Late Ed-Final, 1; Helen Dewar and Amy Goldstein, "Medicare Bill Squeezes Through House at Dawn," The Washington Post, November 23, 2003, Final, A01; James Kuhnhenn, "House Approves Medicare Overhaul; The 220-215 Vote Came After an All-Night Struggle. The Bill Offers, for the First Time, a Prescription- Drug Benefit," The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 23, 2003, City-D, A01.

## The Some People's Voice: Talk Radio and Public Policy

Local hosts created a particular problem for potentially solicitous congressmen, as they spread substantial misinformation about the bill.<sup>984</sup>

On the day before the vote, Rush Limbaugh lamented:

Well, that's bunk. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) said, "If you have to be pure, you can't accomplish anything on the left or the right and you can't govern." DeLay is making the best of a tough situation. He shouldn't have to, because the nation isn't clamoring for this bill, which will force all of you to pay for Bill Gates' pharmacy bill when he turns 65. Some people genuinely want it, but those people are wrong. There is a lot of politics going on here... These entitlements will eat up money for our security and other priorities, while the deficit rises skyward. Democrats oppose the bill now because, #1, they don't think government ever takes enough of your money to fund their vote-buying schemes, and #2, if anyone is going to get credit for growing government he better not have an (R) after his name. Ted Kennedy will eventually decide to "fix" this bill rather than fight it, and by "fix" he'll mean expanding it and killing off the small test programs for medical savings accounts. It's fun to watch the spectacle of the Democrats attacking the AARP, but, sadly, the bottom line is that the GOP is all for growing the federal government. Limited government is dead - for now, anyway.<sup>985</sup>

Limbaugh's critique came in spite of Republicans aggressively courting him and colleague Sean Hannity for months on the legislation, including appearances by House Majority Leader DeLay on their programs.

While this outreach muted their criticism to a degree (Limbaugh's lament did not include a call to action), the talk radio pressure contributed to the opposition of twenty-five conservative Republicans, 986 many of whom typically supported leadership, to the bill.987 This opposition, in turn, necessitated the hours of arm twisting and negotiating. Passage of the House version of the bill in June had required another unusual, hour long late night vote that only ended when

<sup>984</sup> Shogren, Interview With Author.

<sup>985</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Limited Government Is Dead - For Now," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 21, 2003, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2003/11/21/limited\_government\_is\_dead\_for\_now.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>986</sup> House Roll Call Vote 669, HR1, Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, On Agreeing to the Conference Report, 108th Cong., 1st sess. November 22, 2003, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2003/roll669.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2003/roll669.xml</a>.

<sup>987</sup> Michael Stokke, Interview With Author, July 2, 2014; John Feehery, Interview With Author, May 2, 2013.

leadership promised Representative Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) a vote on legislation legalizing the reimportation of prescription drugs (which the leadership opposed).<sup>988</sup>

As the tale of the prescription drug benefit indicated, talk radio had far more potency as a negative in the policymaking process (i.e. preventing legislation) than it did as a force to get legislation enacted. On some issues, such as immigration reform, talk radio played a major role in blocking legislation, or in forcing long and tortured processes to pass legislation. Additionally, talk radio could simplify smaller or technical issues, fit them into broader narratives, and activate a small, unrepresentative portion of the electorate. This transformation catapulted arcane policy matters into divisive hot button topics. The ensuing tumult destroyed any prospect of a bill becoming law. Members of Congress had no interest in risking a backlash over legislation that had either no constituency, or a broad, but disengaged, constituency. 989 Talk radio also affected public policy and the policymaking process in many unseen and hard to define ways, because it altered the institutional culture in Congress and the political calculations that both leadership and rank and file members made about allocating their finite resources.

Talk radio's ability to affect legislation derived from hosts' friendship with their listeners, and their ability to define and frame issues in terms that motivated listeners to voice opposition to

<sup>988</sup> Helen Dewar and Amy Goldstein, "Medicare Expansion Reaches Last Hurdle; House Vote Sends Drug Benefit Plan to Hill Negotiators," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2003, Final Ed A1; Wayne Washington, "Full-Court Press' By Bush Plays Part in Medicare Victory," *The Boston Globe*, June 28, 2003, 3rd, A3; Norman Ornstein, "Don't Sacrifice Deliberation for Expediency," *Roll Call*, July 9, 2003; Jessamyn Blau and Jon Sawyer, "Bill That Aims to Lower Drug Prices Draws Fire," *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 24, 2003, five star late lift, A1; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "F.D.A. Officials Press Legislators to Oppose Bill on Importing Less Expensive Drugs," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2003, Late Edition, 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>989</sup> As John W. Kingdon articulated, in some cases "a majority of the mass public favor one priority, but a smaller number of people with different preferences of greater intensity may affect government priorities more." Often talk radio could motivate the minority with intense sentiments to convey them to legislators; Kingdon, *Agendas*, *Alternatives*, *and Public Policies* (Boston: Longman, 2011), updated 2nd ed, 66.

legislation to their representatives and senators.<sup>990</sup> The resulting outcry prompted Republicans to refuse to compromise or support a bill (occasionally talk radio could similarly affect Democrats depending on the demographics of their constituencies and the issue). Depending on the makeup of Congress and the issue battle, hosts experienced varying levels of success. Most hosts opposed compromise, and they often exposed legislation that was drafted in secret and "outed" legislative gimmicks or other attempts to hide a bill's costs. Although the historical evidence does not lend itself to a model or formula explaining when and how talk radio affected either the legislative process or public policy, there can be little doubt that talk radio constituted a major force in the legislative realm.

#### How and Why Talk Radio Has An Effect

As R. Douglas Arnold explained, members of Congress cared primarily about being reelected. As such, they avoided risk and were acutely sensitive to signals from their constituents on pending legislation. This orientation empowered talk radio in two ways: first, because of hosts' special relationship with their listeners, they could trigger scores of calls, faxes, letters, and emails on a topic signaling to legislators that supporting a bill was risky. Even if lawmakers understood that talk radio had generated a deluge of messages, such feedback might

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>990</sup> Matthew Baum demonstrated that consumption of Fox News and CNN influenced how people (especially those open-minded, more moderate, independent viewers) perceived the debate over health care reform (and their preferred outcome), Even though Baum's findings indicate that the largely conservative audience for talk radio would likely limit the medium's ability to shape listeners' views on issues, talk radio hosts still could play a major role in fitting more complex or technical policy issues into a larger, more familiar frame, and giving listeners a reason to care about the issue. See Matthew A. Baum, "Partisan Media and Attitude Polarization: The Case of Healthcare Reform," in *Regulatory Breakdown: The Crisis of Confidence in U.S. Regulation*, ed. Cary Coglianese, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 118-142.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>991</sup> R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 5. <sup>992</sup> To put talk radio into Arnold's model, hosts served as instigators, who activated what might otherwise be an inattentive public. See Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, 17-87, especially 30 and 68-69.

still change the calculus on a piece of legislation. After all why take a risk if there did not appear to be any corresponding benefit, or take a great risk if acting promised only a small benefit?

Second, typically, the media and, thus, the public, only concentrated on all but the biggest bills during the climatic stages of the legislative process. Talk radio, by contrast, often exposed policy proposals to scrutiny and criticism from a small, unrepresentative slice of the electorate at the earliest stages of the legislative process, when they were at their most vulnerable. On some less salient issues, the mainstream media never provided widespread coverage, thereby enabling talk radio to have an impact without any sort of an informational counterweight. For example, on his election day 1992 show, Limbaugh reminded listeners about a hideous "hidden House bill" about which he had previously sounded an alert. An unnamed House committee had surreptitiously and without debate bottled up HR 4848," which lowered the threshold at which assets became subject to the estate tax, because it had no chance of garnering President Bush's signature. 993 Limbaugh bemoaned the bill's redistributive intent and warned listeners who thought that their assets would never reach the new threshold of \$200,000 about how easy exceeding that amount would be. He revealed that listeners who requested a copy of the bill would receive a Senate version that omitted this odious provision. Yet, he cautioned that Democrats could easily resurrect the provision if Bill Clinton won the presidency. Limbaugh offered HR 4848 as another reason to defeat Clinton, but talk radio could similarly bring committee bills to listeners' attention long before they received significant mainstream media coverage for the purpose of burying or altering legislation. These early alerts empowered talk

<sup>993</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, at 38:00, November 3, 1992, http://c-spanvideo.org/program/Limb.

radio's audience to weigh in on legislation at a time when most Americans, including many who might view the legislation more positively, did not know it existed.<sup>994</sup>

Arnold also described how legislators favored using procedure to hide the costs of a bill, as well as to obscure its authors (at least for controversial legislation). Secrecy allowed for the construction of complex compromise legislation with significant costs that organized interests or passionate minorities in the citizenry opposed. If, in fact, these interests learned about the specifics of a bill at an earlier, delicate, stage of negotiations, they could destroy or impede its legislative prospects. By rallying allies on Capitol Hill, organizing their membership in opposition, and finding common cause with other opponents, these groups could alter the politics surrounding the issue. Talk radio possessed the power to lift the veil of secrecy, and to directly connect the costs, or perceived negatives of legislation to individual members of Congress. Often times, unhappy legislators (or staffers) who wanted to kill a bill shared information with powerful talk radio hosts to great effect.

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones discussed the importance of issue definition in agenda setting, and they explained how a change in the facet of an issue on which the media focused could lead to a new issue definition, which spurred legislative activity. They detailed how the media focused on a narrow range of topics at any one time. The media, they argued, was fairly monolithic, speaking to a small group of sources and often focusing on a similar element

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>994</sup> John W. Kingdon explained why an opening existed for talk radio in these policy areas. "There are also severe limits on the ability of general public opinion to affect policy formation. Many important spheres, for one thing, are nearly invisible to the general public;" Kingdon, *Agendas*, *Alternatives and Public Policies*, 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>995</sup> He writes, "weakening the traceability chain is a superb method for protecting legislators from their constituents' wrath for imposing costs on them;" Arnold, *Logic of Congressional Action*, 100-101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>996</sup> Berry and Sobieraj note the effectiveness of "outrage media" at "enhancing the traceability of actions by legislators;" Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 195.

of an issue battle.<sup>997</sup> The role of talk radio in the legislative arena upset this pattern. Often talk radio (and its progeny, such as cable news and the blogosphere) covered issues that the rest of the media ignored or covered only briefly, and it narrowcast to a small slice of the public. As such, talk radio did not need to dramatically alter the dominant issue definition or the subset of an issue on which the mass media and the majority of the public focused.<sup>998</sup> Instead, talk radio could elevate the prominence of an issue or a frame for a small slice of the electorate and focus attention on the most positive or negative aspect of the debate.<sup>999</sup> Crucially, hosts could also motivate these voters to agitate on the issue. By doing so, hosts tilted the legislative playing field.

Even on the most salient issues, with countless interest groups and media actors involved on both sides, talk radio possessed the ability to affect the legislative process, and in fact, to kill legislation. The Senate rules aided such efforts as hosts only needed to convince the leadership in either house of Congress or forty-one senators that the risks of pursuing or supporting legislation outweighed any potential benefits. This calculation could go far beyond estimating electoral risk. Only a limited number of proposed bills ever reached the floor and received votes. As such, the cost of legislation also included the amount of floor time required, the difficulty of wrangling votes in support of the legislation, and what collateral damage it might do to other, higher priority legislation. Committee leadership also considered the difficulty of getting a bill through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>997</sup> Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, *Agendas and Instabilities In American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2nd ed., 103-126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>998</sup> Berry and Sobieraj discuss three cases, all of which received substantial mainstream coverage because journalists could not ignore the clamor initially generated by the "outrage media" and subsequently amplified by legislators; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 200. I would contend that there are additional possible methods through which talk radio forced mainstream outlets to cover issues, including inundating Capitol Hill with negative feedback on a topic, or altering a bill's legislative prospects.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>999</sup> Berry and Sobieraj offer evidence that "outrage media" could introduce new frames into public policy debates. While Baumgartner, et. al demonstrate how rarely issues become reframed in the legislative arena, talk radio never needed to undertake that task. Rather, hosts simply had to alter the understanding of the issue for their audience; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 198-199; Frank R. Baumgartner, et. al., *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 173-187.

subcommittee and committee, and again, whether it would hurt other legislative efforts of greater import. As such, party leaders often decided that fighting for certain legislation was not worth the cost, both in terms of political danger, but also in terms of floor time utilized (especially in the Senate) and other legislation that might not pass as a result of the fight. Frequently, even when hosts could not stop a bill, they could force changes to a distasteful provision or two. Hosts achieved this influence both by, over time, affecting public perceptions of the issue and its importance, and also by rallying their listeners on the legislation at key moments in the legislative process. The best example of this two step process came from the unsuccessful bipartisan attempt to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation in 2007.

#### **Immigration**

The history of talk radio agitating on the issue of illegal immigration had deep roots. Talk radio helped to ignite the backlash that fueled the 1994 campaign behind California Proposition 187 (which prohibited illegal aliens from receiving social services). Frank Sharry, the founder and executive director of the pro-immigration reform organization America's Voice, worked against Proposition 187 and saw how effectively talk radio generated opposition to immigration and support for the proposition. He started receiving requests to discuss immigration on talk radio shows at that time. Similarly, Oregon-based talk radio host Lars Larson recalled discussing the issue continually beginning in the late 1990s when he served as a fill-in host before getting a show of his own. 1002

Marshall Fitz, the Director of Immigration Policy at the liberal Center for American Progress, remembered that after 9/11, talk's radio's message on immigration connected with a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1000</sup> Candi Wolff, Interview With Author, January 22, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1001</sup> Frank Sharry, Interview With Author, February 24, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1002</sup> Lars Larson, Interview With Author, November 16, 2012.

new potency and shaped public opinion. He and other advocates for reform spent all of their time trying to combat what they believed to be misinformation disseminated by conservative media, especially Fox News and CNN host Lou Dobbs, but also talk radio.<sup>1003</sup>

After President Bush won reelection in 2004, he selected Social Security reform over immigration reform as his top domestic priority. Nonetheless, the Senate began to try to move immigration reform forward, but the effort temporarily stalled because the confirmation process for two new Supreme Court justices occupied the Senate Judiciary Committee's time. As the legislative wheels slowly ground into motion, talk radio advocated passionately against what hosts considered to be amnesty. During the summer of 2005, the Minutemen, a group that advocated for border security and patrolled the border, became a staple on talk radio and cable television. 1004

Many hosts took their advocacy beyond the airwaves and hosted events, challenged sponsors, and encouraged listeners to rally against illegal immigration. They freely criticized President Bush on the issue. San Diego host Roger Hedgecock took his advocacy against "amnesty" a step further by organizing the annual Hold Their Feet to the Fire lobbying trip in partnership with the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). This trip involved a coalition of hosts from across the country descending on Washington with several hundred "listener lobbyists," who FAIR trained to lobby legislators. The hosts broadcast live from a radio row and the citizen lobbyists spent their days meeting with legislators and their staff. They reported on their progress on some of the hosts' shows. 1005 As early as 2005, these trips appeared to pay dividends. Lars Larson told *Talkers Magazine* that when that year's trip arrived in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1003</sup> Marshall Fitz, Interview With Author, February 21, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1004</sup> Sharry, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1005</sup> Roger Hedgecock, Interview With Author, January 9, 2013.

Washington, they heard that the "Real ID" Act (which established standards for drivers' licenses and state ID cards, and prohibited federal agencies from accepting state IDs that did not meet these standards for official purposes)<sup>1006</sup> was dead. By the second day of broadcasting, however, the bill was headed into law with support from President Bush and even some Democrats.<sup>1007</sup>

In December 2005, talk radio's agitation contributed to the House of Representatives passing a punitive, enforcement only bill that criminalized violation of immigration laws (including being in the country illegally) and enhanced border security, but did not contain a provision for guest workers. This bill sparked a massive backlash among Hispanics, which included marches and street demonstrations organized, in part, by Hispanic radio. This reaction helped to propel the legislative process forward. The spring of 2006 featured an organizational war between Hispanic media and pro-reform groups on the one side, and conservative media and anti-reform groups on the other, with each jockeying to influence the legislative debate. 1009

As the Senate poised to take up immigration legislation, host G. Gordon Liddy warned listeners that the Senate was trying to shove a bill down their throats that included guest worker and "amnesty" provisions. Liddy urged them to call their senators and several times he read off the phone number for the Senate switchboard. Liddy accused President Bush of disingenuously supporting renewable green cards for guest workers that would allow them to stay in the country

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1006</sup> Department of Homeland Security, "Real ID Frequently Asked Questions for the Public," Published January 11, 2015, <a href="http://www.dhs.gov/real-id-public-faqs">http://www.dhs.gov/real-id-public-faqs</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1007</sup> Adam Sharon, "Hosts and Their Listeners Hold Politicians' Feet to the Fire," *Talkers Magazine*, no.158 (May 2005): 46-47.

<sup>1008</sup> House Roll Call Vote 661, H.R. 4437, Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, On Passage, 109th Cong. 1st. Sess., December 16, 2005, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2005/roll661.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2005/roll661.xml</a>; National Conference of State Legislatures, "Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Actl H.R. 4437 Co-Sponsors: Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) and Representative Peter King (R-NY), Immigrant Policy Project, accessed May 29, 2015, <a href="http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/summary-of-the-sensenbrenner-immigration-bill.aspx">http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/summary-of-the-sensenbrenner-immigration-bill.aspx</a>; The Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, H.R. 4437, 109th Cong, <a href="http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr4437rfs/pdf/BILLS-109hr4437rfs.pdf">http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr4437rfs/pdf/BILLS-109hr4437rfs.pdf</a>. 1009 Laura Burton Capps, Interview With Author, February 21, 2014; Fitz, Interview With Author.

forever, and to have "anchor babies," who would keep everyone around them in the country. At least one caller reported that he had called his senators' offices thanks to Liddy's suggestion. Additionally, an outside group bought commercial time on Liddy's Manchester Tennessee affiliate to urge then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R) to support effective immigration enforcement legislation, noting that the Senate was moving in the opposite direction and exhorting listeners to tell Frist not to back down. 1010

Rush Limbaugh spent more than two months railing about the bill, Republican motivations, and the failed promises surrounding past immigration reform debates. He argued:

Reform, my rear end! Congress has the power to increase legal limits of immigration, but it's nothing to do with right and wrong. It's a straw man. Even if we stipulate that a guest worker program helps to deal with people who are here illegally, how does that help stem the flow of future illegals? It does just the opposite. It's going to increase it.

We're going to have exactly the same problem we have now in the years ahead. When you legalize what is illegal, you are said to be courageous and compassionate, yet the root problem in Mexico isn't addressed. The illegal influx continues, and the politics of this has to make you laugh. It cracks me up. It probably makes you laugh, too. They argue that we need to attract this vote. You know the best vote, the highest Hispanic vote total George W. Bush ever got, was about 44% when he ran for governor of Texas. So if we continue to get a smaller percentage of the vote by a growing community in this country, will we win elections? We ought to be talking about taking our principles to all people regardless of race or religion and win the day with those arguments, not by pandering and embracing illegal behavior.

You've got some elites in Washington who are just hell-bent on this election angle, and they're worried that too much focus on keeping the illegal immigrants out of the country will make the Republican Party a minority party for the long term -- and they call people like me "nativists." Yeah nativists, xenophobes, racists, what have you. I mean, it's quite interesting. But what good is being a Republican or a conservative if you're going to throw it all out in order to attract certain votes from people who have grown up and been weaned on an entitlement mentality and expect that? And if somebody offers it, they're going to vote for it. So are we going to get in a competition with the left to see who can offer the biggest welfare state in order to get this swing vote of future Hispanics?

If we keep having more and more of them come into the country but we keep getting less and less of them to vote for us, how this accomplishing anything politically? At the same time, we're dumping our own

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1010</sup> G. Gordon Liddy, *The G. Gordon Liddy Program*, March 23, 2006, accessed via the Library of Congress' Web Radio Recording Project, the contents of which can be accessed only through computers in the Library. See the index at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html">http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/Webradiotoc.html</a>; The Library of Congress happened to record Liddy's March 23, 2006 program from his Manchester Tennessee affiliate. I strongly suspect, however, that if anti-immigration reform groups purchased advertisements on this station, they also placed them on stations in the states of other important senators.

conservative principles all over the place in order to secure whatever percentage of this swing vote. It's just fear out there, folks. 1011

Limbaugh also illuminated the procedures and secrecy that the supporters of the legislation employed.

I am told that basically five Republican senators were holed up last night trying to put together some sort of face-saving compromise. Those senators are McCain, Hagel, Specter, Mel Martinez and Frist, and the other Republican senators had no idea what they were doing. The initial bill that came out of this committee was 500 pages long, and they're trying to push it through today without anybody having had a chance to read it. That's why you're seeing stories that Republicans are prepared to filibuster their own bill. Yes. Republicans are preparing to filibuster this thing if it comes up for a vote, because they don't know what's in it and they weren't included in the hole in the wall gang that was working on this last night to put this together.

So you look who worked this out: McCain, Hagel, Specter, Martinez and Frist. You have to ask: Where was George Allen in this meeting? Where was John Cornyn, George Allen? Where was Jeff Sessions in this meeting? Where were some of these other Republican senators? As I said at the opening of the program, I am as big a cynic when it comes to elected officials as anybody. I don't know that I have ever seen anything like this. Security is *secondary*. The rule of law is *secondary*. All these clowns are doing is blatantly buying votes by making more citizens here. <sup>1012</sup>

In spite of this advocacy and some initial procedural defeats, in May 2006, the Senate passed a bipartisan immigration reform bill sponsored by Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA) by a vote of 62 to 36.<sup>1013</sup> The House refused to conference the two irreconcilable bills, intending instead to use the issue to motivate the conservative base in the midterm election campaign.<sup>1014</sup> Those elections, however, delivered Republicans a crushing defeat—they lost control of both houses of Congress for the first time in twelve years.

Two thousand and seven dawned auspiciously for immigration reform, as it seemed likely that something supported by the Democratic majority in Congress and the Republican President

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1011</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Republicans Abandon Principle Out of Fear," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, April 3, 2006, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2006/04/03/republicans abandon principle out of fear.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1012</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Democrats Ripe for Political Embarrassment, But Gutless GOP Would Rather Pander," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, April 4, 2006, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2006/04/06/democrats\_ripe\_for\_political\_embarrassment\_but\_gutless\_gop\_would\_rather\_pander.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1013</sup> Senate Roll Call Vote 157, S. 2611, Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006, On Passage of the Bill, 109th Cong. 2nd Sess., May 25, 2006, <a href="http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a> congress=109&session=2&vote=00157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1014</sup> Fitz, Interview With Author.

would find its way into law before long. A bipartisan group in the Senate, along with the Bush Administration, spent months fashioning a workable immigration reform bill. According to Joel Kaplan, the Deputy White House Chief of Staff, the specter of talk radio hovered in the background of the negotiations for Republicans. They tried to address the right's objections to the 2006 bill, understanding how potent talk radio could be if they did not. Senator McCain assumed a lesser role in negotiations because of opposition from the Republican base, which posed problems for his nascent presidential campaign. Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ), an opponent of the 2006 bill because he felt its amnesty provisions went too far, stepped into McCain's place. Kyl believed that with Democrats controlling Congress, someone like him needed to get involved to shape the bill. Kyl, along with Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), negotiated with Senator Kennedy to get the best bill that they could. Senator Indiana senator in the Senator Indiana senator in the Senator Indiana senator Indiana

The negotiations generated real optimism from President Bush and congressional leaders. At the end of an event, President Bush confidently told groups that he would see them at the bill signing ceremony. Yet, the bill failed on the Senate floor in part because conservative radio hosts, including Sean Hannity, Hugh Hewitt, Laura Ingraham, and Bill O'Reilly, their guests, and groups who placed paid advertisements on talk programs, galvanized a huge grassroots outcry that the bill provided amnesty for illegal immigrants and did not adequately secure the border. Limbaugh succinctly summarized the position of most talkers:

I mean a public policy problem that goes to the heart of what it means to be 'American' and which threatens to fundamentally, and perhaps permanently, alter American society for the worse... few Americans believe that what we need to do is enshrine the current broken situation into law," and then expand it. Yet that's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1015</sup> Joel Kaplan, Interview With Author, October 1, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1016</sup> Fitz, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1017</sup> Jon Kyl, Interview With Author, October 15, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1018</sup> Larson, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1019</sup> Kyl, Interview With Author.

exactly what this Comprehensive Destruction of the Republican Party Act of 2007 will do. Folks, it is an utter disaster, and it must be defeated. There's no middle ground here. 1020

According to a Republican Senate staffer who watched this process unfold, the negotiating group made a tactical blunder by holding a press conference when they reached an agreement on the provisions of the bill without first waiting to translate the agreement into legislative language. Without details to hand out, the senators created a vacuum that talk radio hosts opportunistically filled with their own interpretation of the bill's framework.<sup>1021</sup>

Beginning in March (two months before the Senate debated the bill), Republican senators, including lead negotiator Kyl and Senators Trent Lott (R-MS) and Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) found their offices inundated with negative feedback. Lott even received death threats. Lott and Chambliss liked to answer the phones in their offices, often putting fulminating callers back on their heels. Chambliss recounted that when he informed swearing, raging callers that they were talking to Senator Chambliss and started to tell them about the bill, he could hear them "gasping for air." They were prepared to eviscerate a staffer, but they never expected to talk to the senators themselves. Senator Bob Bennett (R-UT) paid office staffers a bonus for handling the volume of vitriolic phone calls that he received as the Senate debated the bill. 1022

In May, as the Senate began debating the bill, Roger Hedgecock brought Hold Their Feet to the Fire 2007 to Washington. The week included over forty hosts, who covered seventy-five percent of the country, broadcasting and imploring their listeners to call senators. The trip also involved 350 citizen lobbyists descending on Capitol Hill, and using social media to inundate senators with messages. On the last day, the hosts triumphantly shut down the Capitol Hill

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1020</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Immigration Bill Must Be Defeated," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, May 21, 2007, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/05/21/immigration\_bill\_must\_be\_defeated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1021</sup>Anonymous Senate Staffer 1, Interview With Author, April 3, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1022</sup> Trent Lott, Interview With Author; Saxby Chambliss, Interview With Author; Jon Kyl, Interview With Author; Bob Bennett, Interview With Author.

switchboard.<sup>1023</sup> According to a *Pew* study, talk radio hosts devoted twenty-three percent of their airtime during the month in which the bill's fate hung in the balance (mid-May to mid-June) to denouncing the immigration bill.<sup>1024</sup>

Crucially, in the middle of the debate, Congress took its annual Memorial Day recess.

Before the recess, the supporters of the bill believed that they had the support of sixty senators, which would have been enough to break a filibuster. The recess, however, gave grassroots groups and conservative media (along with some liberal groups, like organized labor, that opposed the bill for other reasons) an opportunity to demonstrate to senators just how unpopular the bill was with their constituents. Although the Senate resumed debate after the recess, the bill's prospects had dimmed; supporters found themselves stuck with fifty-nine supporters, unable to secure a sixtieth vote.

Georgia Senators Chambliss and Johnny Isakson cosponsored the bill, but after withering attacks from talk radio, they joined the opposition because of intense constituent pressure. Chambliss admitted that they made a mistake by not communicating with their constituents about the bill. The vacuum allowed opponents of any immigration reform (some of whom profited from their opposition) to use the airwaves to transform amnesty into a "magic word." Isakson's office received 21,000 calls opposing the bill in contrast to only 6,000 supporting it.

During the fractious debate, Chambliss and Isakson flew to Atlanta for the Georgia Republican

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1023</sup> Roger Hedgecock, Interview With Author; Larson, Interview With Author.

<sup>1024</sup> Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media Staff, "Will Conservative Talkers Take on Immigration Reform," *Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media*, February 1, 2013, <a href="http://www.journalism.org/2013/02/01/will-conservative-talkers-take-immigration-reform/">http://www.journalism.org/2013/02/01/will-conservative-talkers-take-immigration-reform/</a>; "Did Talk Radio Hosts Help Derail the Immigration Bill: PEJ Talk Show Index June 3-8, 2007, *Pew Research Center: Journalism and the Media*, June 14, 2007, <a href="https://www.journalism.org/2007/06/14/pej-talk-show-index-june-3-8-2007/">https://www.journalism.org/2007/06/14/pej-talk-show-index-june-3-8-2007/</a>; More broadly, Berry and Sobieraj mention that hosts devoted sixteen percent of their airtime to the immigration debate during the entire second quarter of 2007; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 205.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1025</sup> Kaplan, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1026</sup> Chambliss, Interview With Author.

Convention. On the drive to the convention site, Chambliss' wife called to ask what in the world he had done to infuriate people? In his convention speech, Chambliss opted to address the issue directly, prompting five convention goers in the back of the room to boo him. The following week, one of the five called Chambliss to apologize for his conduct, but the damage was already done, as the story made national headlines.

Senators tried to quell the discontent on talk radio with little success. Chambliss consulted with Atlanta-based host Neal Boortz, but his spokeswoman declared that Boortz, "popped us pretty good." When Kyl tried to reach out to some old friends on talk radio, many no longer wanted to talk to him. On Phoenix station KFYI, where Kyl appeared regularly, the hosts disagreed with him, but were sufficiently courteous to have a constructive conversation. Kyl also conversed with Hugh Hewitt, who was convalescing from a back injury when the senate negotiators unveiled the bill. Without much else to do, Hewitt read page after page of the bill, ultimately concluding that it provided "blanket amnesty." Hewitt proposed changes to the bill, several of which struck Kyl as useful; thus, as he attempted to modify the bill in order to save it, he introduced them as amendments. Conservative talkers also skewered guests from the Bush administration. As Bush Deputy Press Secretary Tony Fratto explained, hosts ignored any explanation proffered by a guest. Instead, they argued that any bill which allowed anyone who had entered the country illegally to become a citizen at any point constituted amnesty. 1029

<sup>1027</sup> Charles Babington, "Talk Shows Influence Immigration Debate," *The Associated Press*, June 23, 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1028</sup> Kyl, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1029</sup> Tony Fratto, Interview With Author, July 2, 2013; Robert Bennett, January 4, 2013; Trent Lott, Interview With Author, September 16, 2013; Kyl, Interview With Author.

At the height of the debate, Lott declared that talk radio was "running America and we have to deal with that problem." This remark generated even more scorn from talk radio. Limbaugh used Lott's comments to reframe the debate over the "amnesty bill," as "a battle between Washington and the people, and they know it. So you got a Republican talking about talk radio the way liberals talk about talk radio, which tells you (it tells me) what the real objective of most elected officials in Washington is anyway. It's to perpetuate themselves and their jobs and to spend money and maybe not -- well, yes." As part of his effort to kill the legislation, Limbaugh also read the names of each Republican senator who voted to cut off the Senate's debate (clearing the way for a final vote on the legislation), implicitly inviting his listeners to oppose those senators and/or to pressure them to switch their positions. 1032

The Hold Their Feat to the Fire website declared, "Hold Their Feet to the Fire successfully defeated the McCain-Kennedy-Bush amnesty bill in 2007, which was hatched in secret and sprung on the American public at the last minute with no time for review, even by lawmakers. The bill died when talk radio roared, and activists fanned out across the Capitol and citizens flooded their lawmaker's switchboard." This assessment was self serving and overstated. Nonetheless, talk radio had a real, tangible impact on the legislative battle. Gong into the climactic floor vote, leaders had commitments from fifty-nine senators to vote for cloture

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1030</sup> Stephen Dinan, "Georgia Senators At Center of Battle. Immigration Votes On Line," *The Washington Times*, June 20, 2007; Stephen Dinan, "Bloggers, Radio Reshaping Bill on Immigration," *The Washington Times*, June 23, 2007; Gail Russell Chaddock, "Fury Grows Over US Immigration Bill," *The Christian Science Monitor*," May 25, 2007; N.C. Aizenman, "Small-Town Resistance Helped to Seal Defeat," *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2007. <sup>1031</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "What Do We Do About Trent Lott?," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, June 15, 2007, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/06/15/what do we do about trent lott">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/06/15/what do we do about trent lott</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1032</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "The List: GOP Senators Who Voted For Cloture," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, June 26, 2007, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/06/26/the list gop senators who voted for cloture.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1033</sup> Federation for American Immigration Reform, "Feet to the Fire 2013," FAIR has subsequently redesigned their website and removed this page. It can be accessed using the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine* <a href="http://www.fairus.org/action/feet-to-the-fire-2013">http://www.fairus.org/action/feet-to-the-fire-2013</a>.

(which would cut off debate and allow for an eventual majority vote on the bill itself); once it became clear that they could not get the last vote that they needed, they released senators from their pledges.<sup>1034</sup> As such, only forty-six senators voted for the bill—perhaps a sign of how many senators, even some supporters of the bill, did not want to be publicly associated with it, which would have invited the wrath of talk radio hosts down upon them.<sup>1035</sup>

History produced this wariness, as legislators knew that crossing talk radio on immigration could imperil their careers. In 2004, star Los Angeles hosts John Kobylt and Ken Chiampou selected five Republican House members with "bad" records on illegal immigration, and in the style of a popular reality show, they and their listeners selected Congressman David Dreier to be "voted off the island." Kobylt and Chiampou invited the five lawmakers to appear on their show. 1036 Dreier declined because he believed in a fairly free flow of goods and people across borders—that people ought to be able to go wherever they could be best compensated for their labor. Recognizing that not everyone agreed with this position, Dreier understood that appearing would require either soft pedaling his beliefs or risking being skewered for them. 1037 From the perspective of Kobylt and Chiampou, however, Dreier's attitude and record reflected the rank hypocrisy that bothered them most about politicians. Dreier claimed to be against illegal immigration, but Kobylt found his record to bely this claim. Kobylt and Chiampou urged listeners to defeat Dreier because he was only paying "lip service" to halting illegal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1034</sup> Bennett, Interview With Author; Kaplan, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1035</sup> Senate Roll Call Vote 235, S. 1639, A Bill to Provide for Comprehensive Immigration Reform and for Other Purposes, On the Cloture Motion, 110th Cong., 1st Sess., June 28, 2007, <a href="http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=1&vote=00235">http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?congress=110&session=1&vote=00235</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1036</sup> John Kobylt, Interview With Author, February 13, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1037</sup> Hugh Halpern, Interview With Author, August 20, 2014.

immigration.<sup>1038</sup> Dreier resented this characterization, because he did not see opposing stationing troops at the border as supporting illegal immigration.<sup>1039</sup>

Dreier spent the last two weeks of the campaign promising a new focus on immigration, even running ads featuring Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger calling him "tough as nails" on illegal immigrants. Yet, Dreier only won reelection with less than 54%, the worst showing of his then twenty-five year career. After surviving, Dreier remained true to his philosophy on immigration, but he made good on his promise by announcing that he would introduce legislation to mandate the creation of photo-embedded social security cards, which employers would be required to check against a national database to confirm the immigration status of a job applicant. <sup>1040</sup> Dreier also became far more cautious about doing media appearances, limiting his radio appearances to regular hits with Hugh Hewitt and Dennis Prager.

While Dreier survived electorally, his colleagues could ill afford to ignore the formidable threat that talk radio could pose to their careers. Kobylt and Chiampou actually took on Dreier under the least advantageous circumstances. They targeted him in a general election, not a primary, in which the more conservative electorate would have magnified their power. Dreier also had a built in cushion in a general election because California's 26th House District had what was known as a Partisan Voting Index of R+5, which meant that it was five points more Republican than the average district. Thus, Dreier was not immune to electoral shifts, but Kobylt and Chiampou essentially needed to convince Republicans to vote for a Democrat (or not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1038</sup> Kobylt, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1039</sup> Halpern, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1040</sup> John Fund, "Rush For the Border; Rush Limbaugh Issues a Warning to President Bush," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1041</sup> The Cook Political Report calculated these averages on a rolling basis. Each score reflected how the district voted in the three previous presidential elections. The Cook Political Report generously shared their data with me in an email from Loren Fulton on March 18, 2014.

to vote) in order to unseat Dreier in a general election. Yet, indicating the influence that their campaign had, Dreier beat challenger Cynthia Matthews 53-43 in the Republican year of 2004, and beat her 57-38% in the Democratic wave election of 2006. 1042

In many ways, the revolt against the 2007 immigration bill foreshadowed the 2009 rise of the Tea Party (right down to the damage inflicted on a major piece of legislation during a congressional recess). 1043 A populist, conservative uprising successfully uprooted a bipartisan plan favored by Democrats, Republican elites, including President Bush, and business interests. In subsequent years, this pattern would become familiar, but in 2007, it was unusual, at least in terms of its success. Talk radio, as it would subsequently do in aiding the rise of the Tea Party, facilitated and contributed to this revolt by framing the immigration issue for many conservatives, channeling their fury into a concerted legislative campaign, and providing a giant megaphone to boost the cause. 1044

#### Gift Ban

Talk radio possessed even greater power to affect legislation and congressional deliberation on less prominent issues. These issues received relatively little mainstream media attention, and engaged far fewer interests in the legislative process. Thus, by stirring up even a relatively small hornet's nest of opposition on these issues, talk radio could convince legislators

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1042</sup> "American Votes 2004 Election Results: California," <u>CNN.Com</u>, <a href="http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/CA/">http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/CA/</a>, accessed June 1, 2015; "America Votes 2006: US House of Representatives/California 26," <a href="https://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006//pages/results/states/CA/H/26/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006//pages/results/states/CA/H/26/index.html</a>, accessed June 1, 2015. <a href="https://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006//pages/results/states/CA/H/26/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006//pages/results/states/CA/H/26/index.html</a>, accessed June 1, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1044</sup> Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson reveal the large emphasis placed upon combatting illegal immigration by Tea Party members. While the fiscal views of the Tea Party have garnered more attention, the members interviewed by Skocpol and Williamson passionately opposed immigration reform. They considered illegal immigration such a problem that they supported greater government spending and police power to combat it; Berry and Sobieraj support this analysis, citing data presented by Gary C. Jacobson to argue that Tea Party support was highly correlated with anti-immigration attitudes; Skocpol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking Of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 205.

that supporting a bill presented great and unnecessary risk, especially given the lack of groups clamoring for passage.

Perhaps the best example of the various strands of talk radio's power coming together to influence smaller legislation occurred during the debate over the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1994. Initially, the bill experienced smooth sailing. The Senate approved it in 1993 by a ninety-five to two margin. The House followed course in 1994 by a 315-110 vote. When a House-Senate conference committee produced what negotiators believed to be a strong final product, it fell victim to a Senate filibuster through which a coalition of thirty-six Republicans and ten Democrats blocked passage. Why?

In theory, all members of Congress had a self-interested reason to oppose the legislation. The bill banned lobbyists from paying for any gift, meal, entertainment, or travel junket for lawmakers. It also required lobbyists to register and disclose financial information. Privately, it aroused the ire of the "congressional golf caucus," as well as members who were insulted by the implication that a special interest could buy them for a mere sandwich or a ticket to an event. Additionally, a month before the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans had extra incentive to prevent the Democratic majority from having achievements to tout on the campaign trail. Load Legitimate policy differences also existed over how to best regulate the role of lobbyists in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1045</sup> Senate Roll Call Vote 116, on S. 349, Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1994, 103rd Cong. 1st. sess., May 6, 1993, <a href="http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a><a href="https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1046</sup> House Roll Call Vote 90, on S. 349, Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1994, 103rd Cong. 2nd sess., March 24, 1994, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll090.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll090.xml</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1047</sup> Senate Roll Call Vote 325, S. 349, Lobbying Disclosure Act, 103rd Cong. 2nd sess., October 7, 1994, On the Cloture Motion, <a href="http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a> congress=103&session=2&vote=00325

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1048</sup> Anonymous House Staffer, Interview With Author, March 12, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1049</sup> Brian Williams, "Newscast: President's lobbying reform proposal killed by Republicans," *NBC Nightly News*, October 6, 1994.

political process. Paul Brubaker, the staffer working on the bill for Republican sponsor William Cohen (R-ME), recalled how Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA) thought that a law mandating complete disclosure would be more effective than any sort of ban. Nonetheless, all of these potential impediments aside, another Senate staffer involved in drafting the bill noted that coming out of conference committee, the bill's supporters, "thought we had a clear path to enactment." 1051

Yet, House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and colleagues Tom DeLay (R-TX) and Ernest Istook (R-OK) led a last minute charge against the legislation. They enlisted the aid of a plethora of conservative groups, ranging from the Christian Coalition to the National Rifle Association. Many of these groups felt as though the law would hamper their lobbying activities. Gingrich charged that the bill would "require the disclosure of names and addresses of ordinary citizens who do volunteer work for civic and political groups." Gingrich and his allies also enlisted the aid of conservative media, especially talk radio. Gingrich faxed his talking points on the bill to Rush Limbaugh. DeLay sent a fax opposing the bill to 500 conservative radio hosts. Istook alerted conservative activist Paul Weyrich, who lambasted the bill on his own television show and on Michael Reagan's nationally syndicated radio show. The Christian Coalition also helped to spread the word to religious (and secular conservative) broadcasters, including James Dobson and Pat Robertson, who implored their audiences to urge senators to oppose the bill. 1053

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1050</sup> Paul Brubaker, Interview With Author, December 4, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1051</sup> Linda Gustitus, e-mail message to author quoting Senate staffer, February 25, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1052</sup> Christopher Drew, "Pro-GOP calls help kill lobbying bill // PERSPECTIVE: Gingrich succeeds in inciting protests against the reform measure," *The Orange County Register*, October 7, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1053</sup> Drew, "Pro-GOP calls help kill lobbying bill;" Jim Drinkard, "Grassroots Groups Fire Up Faxes, Phones and Airwaves," *The Associated Press Political Service*, October 6, 1994; Katharine Q. Seelye, "All-Out Strategy Hobbled Lobby Bill" *The New York Times*, October 7, 1994.

Limbaugh's assault on the bill began the day that the House approved the conference report (eight days before the failed Senate cloture vote). After receiving Gingrich's talking points he told his television viewers:

Ladies and gentlemen, the United States Congress today, late on Thursday afternoon, actually, passed a bill that one congressman has called Hillary's Revenge.' This is the Lobby Disclosure Act of 1994 and what this bill will do if taken to its full length, or full breadth of possibility, is consider any citizen, member of a grass roots organization or anybody who just happens to call Washington--if you spend more than 10 percent of your time trying to influence the outcome of legislation in Washington, you could be considered a lobbyist and the federal government could require you--will require you to report your existence, the names of yourself and anybody else in your organization, how much time you're spending trying to influence legislation. And if you fail to report this information to them and they find out about it, you could be subject to \$ 200,000 fines for not reporting it.

This is anti--anti-American and unconstitutional if you ask me, because it's constitutional for the United States to have--citizens to have an opportunity to petition their government to redress grievances and so forth. Now, they want you to register, they want you to report who you are, who you're working with, how much money you're spending on this, if you contact anybody in Washington. So if you sit out there and you happen to call a member of Congress and you spend over 10 percent of your time doing this kind of thing, you might have to register as a lobbyist.<sup>1054</sup>

On his radio show, Limbaugh also criticized a provision designed to protect religious groups as being ambiguous, which astounded a House staffer involved in its drafting. This provision actually had been carefully crafted to protect religious leaders from having to register as lobbyists, while simultaneously maintaining the delicate balance required by the religion clauses of the First Amendment (i.e. making sure that government was not in the position to decide what constituted a religious group). 1055

Limbaugh's analysis spawned outlandish allegations about the bill that its' Senate supporters initially struggled to take seriously. A Senate staffer remembered one such rumor "about how churches were going to have to list their members and how much they donated, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1054</sup> Rush Limbaugh, *Rush Limbaugh*, produced by Roger Ailes, aired September 29, 1994 (Multimedia Entertainment).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1055</sup> Anonymous House Staffer 3, Interview With Author, March 12, 2015.

disclose all of their fundraising activities."<sup>1056</sup> Confusion abounded among Senate staffers as these misconceptions became widespread, which quickly imperiled the bill. Their House counterparts conveyed that Limbaugh had caused the rapid spread of these misperceptions. <sup>1057</sup> John Bryant (D-TX) the bill's lead House sponsor saw these claims as a self-interested redherring employed by opponents of the bill and their allies. In a heated series of exchanges on the House floor, he accused opponents of perfidy. Speaking to Republican Deputy Whip Bob Walker (PA), Bryant proclaimed, "There is no grassroots gag. If you want to keep playing free golf, admit it."<sup>1058</sup> This blunt line of attack almost resulted in Bryant's words being taken down—a harsh penalty that precluded a House member from speaking for the remainder of the day. The House approved the conference report by a deceptively comfortable 306-112 margin. In reality, the bill's supporters only triumphed on several procedural votes by far closer 216-205 and 215-202 margins with the vast majority of Republicans opposed. <sup>1059</sup>

Paul Brubaker remembered the Senate switchboards lighting up after Limbaugh took up the issue. Brubaker believed that talkers took advantage of some ambiguity in the bill to spread misinformation. Republican senators devoted one of their weekly lunches to the topic, and Brubaker remembered waiting outside of the senators only meeting and fielding questions from senators as they exited the room. One senator even approached Brubaker and remarked, "so you're the [expletive] responsible for this." As Brubaker and his colleagues worked to pass the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1056</sup> Gustitus, e-mail message to author quoting Senate staffer; Anonymous Senate Staffer 2, Interview With Author, November 25th, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1057</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1058</sup> Representative Bryant 140 Cong., Rec. (September 29, 1994) H 10270.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1059</sup> House Roll Call Vote 449, on H. Res. 550, Waiving Points of Order Against The Conference Report To Accompany S. 349; Lobbying Disclosure Act, On Agreeing to the Resolution, 103rd Cong. 2nd sess., September 29, 1994, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll449.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll449.xml</a>; House Roll Call Vote 450, on S. 349, Lobbying Disclosure Act, On Motion to Recommit The Conference Report, 103rd Cong. 2nd sess., September 29, 1994 <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll450.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll450.xml</a>; House Roll Call Vote 451, on S. 349, Lobbying Disclosure Act, On Agreeing to the Conference Report, 103rd Cong. 2nd sess., September 29, 1994, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll451.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1994/roll451.xml</a>.

bill, they heard from staffers whose senators believed that supporting it had become too risky thanks to the vocal opposition.<sup>1060</sup>

Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), the bill's primary sponsor, decisively tried to stem the tide of misinformation. He became the only significant Democratic elected official to appear in the twenty-seven years of Limbaugh's nationally syndicated radio program. <sup>1061</sup> Levin felt like he had nothing to lose. He explained that the provisions of the bill were nowhere near as dangerous as opponents alleged. Yet, after Levin appeared, Limbaugh also hosted Congressman Istook, who charged that the senator had lied about the bill. <sup>1062</sup> Levin and Cohen even offered to delete the offending provisions from the bill, but some senators blocked this attempt, citing other qualms that they had with the legislation, and the bill died. <sup>1063</sup>

The Republican-led 104th Congress ended up passing a version of the Lobbying Disclosure Act with no opposition after the sponsors altered two of the most controversial provisions. 1064 President Clinton signed it into law in December, 1995. 1065 Eventual passage of the bill indicated that the stated policy objections might simply have provided cover for some senators who opposed the bill for partisan or selfish reasons. Yet, other senators voted against cloture because of the phone calls and faxes that they received from citizens angered by the portrayal of the legislation spread by conservative media and grassroots groups. They were not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1060</sup> Brubaker, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1061</sup> If Limbaugh ever hosted another Democratic elected official, his long time Chief of Staff Kit Carson could not remember who it might have been. According to Carson, Levin was the most "prolific" Democrat ever to appear on Limbaugh's program. Christopher Drew, "Pro-GOP Calls Help Kill Lobbying Bill;" Kit Carson, E-mail Message to Author, December 5, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1062</sup> Drew, "Pro-GOP calls help kill lobbying bill;" Anonymous Senate Staffer, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1063</sup> Editorial, *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1064</sup> Linda Gustitus, Interview With Author, February 10, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1065</sup> Senate Roll Call Vote 328, S. 1060, Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, On Passage of the bill, 104th Cong. 1st sess., July 25, 1995, <a href="http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?">http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\_call\_lists/roll\_call\_vote\_cfm.cfm?</a> congress=104&session=1&vote=00328; House Roll Call Vote 828, H.R. 2564, Lobbying Disclosure Act, 104th Cong. 1st. sess., November 29, 1995, <a href="http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1995/roll828.xml">http://clerk.house.gov/evs/1995/roll828.xml</a>.

about to risk infuriating their constituents a month before an election. Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) admitted as much after voting against cloture. Byrd released a statement explaining that a deliberate campaign of misinformation had prompted what he considered to be unwarranted fears about the bill from his constituents. Nonetheless, the sincere concerns of his constituents, however misguided, compelled Byrd to vote to impede the legislation as he faced re-election. Additionally, even for those senators opposed for selfish or political reasons, obstructing the bill would have been politically unpalatable, absent the cover provided by conservative media's substantive opposition. Indeed, a House staffer who worked on the bill firmly believed that it would have become law in 1994 without the influence of Rush Limbaugh.

Other similar examples existed in which conservative talk radio had a measurable impact on smaller legislation, the legislative process, or congressional rules. In many of those cases, no organized interests or media outlet with sufficient reach existed to counter talk radio. In some cases, the legislation dealt with such minute, technical, or complex issues that the rest of the media only offered minimal coverage, or only addressed the issue after talk radio created controversy. This lack of reporting freed talk radio to frame the issue for the majority of those Americans who weighed in with an opinion. This case also demonstrated talk radio's capacity to alter offensive provisions, even in popular legislation heading for eventual passage. 1067

#### **Elevating and Transforming Small Issues**

Talk radio's influence on policy stemmed from hosts' ability to dramatically transform even complicated, technical legislation into something understandable and ominous—often fitting a bill into broader, regularly discussed themes. Having fifteen hours per week of airtime

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1066</sup> Jim Drinkard, "HI-TECH E-LOBBYING SWAMPS REFORM BILL," *The Charleston Gazette*, October 7, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1067</sup> Candi Wolff, Interview With Author.

allowed hosts to discuss legislative minutiae that other media outlets ignored. For example, Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (D-CO) remembered a debate over patent legislation in the 1990s that ordinarily would have been a housekeeping matter. Schroeder could not fathom anyone turning patent legislation into compelling radio. Typically, only a handful of legislators could even converse on intellectual property issues. Yet, the bill sought to comply with an international treaty, which enabled talk radio to incorporate the legislation into its broader argument against anything related to global governance or the sacrifice of American sovereignty. By distorting the issue or changing the focus, talk radio caused hysteria and made passing legislation arduous. 1068

Talk radio could do this to even the most arcane and technical policy provisions—the type of thing that routinely entered the statute books without any public awareness. In 1989, in order to spur rapid development of cellular telephone systems, Congress permitted the FCC to award licenses by lottery. The FCC decided, however, to award a "pioneer preference," including a free license, to companies that developed breakthrough communications technologies. In late 1992, the FCC designated three such pioneers for personal communications services, including American Personal Communications, of which the Washington Post Company owned seventy percent. In 1993, however, Congress shifted course, and permitted the FCC to auction licenses to the highest bidder.

A year later, powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell introduced bipartisan legislation to mandate that the three pioneer licensees pay roughly 90% of the market rate for their licenses. The FCC then moved to implement a similar stipulation on its own. One of the licensees sued, charging that the FCC exceeded its authority. Congress fretted

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1068</sup> Patricia Schroeder, Interview with Author, March 24, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1069</sup> David Leach, Interview With Author, January 23, 2014.

that if the company won its lawsuit the three pioneers would get their licenses for free. As such, Dingell's legislation became part of a bill to expand the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which needed revenue raising provisions for budget reasons. 1070 Frustrated, at the Clinton administration ignoring its argument on the issue, Pacific Telesis, a competitor to one of the licensees, took advantage of a pro-GATT editorial in the *Washington Post*. It purchased ads in the *Post* and the *Washington Times* attacking the editorial's failure to disclose that the *Post* had a financial interest in the legislation passing.

Talk radio erupted, claiming that the legislation provided a ten percent discount for the *Post* (which fit nicely with the usual talk radio trope about a liberal media in bed with Democrats). While the details of the pioneer preference policy might have been complex and soporific, the public could easily comprehend cronyism and media bias. After the issue erupted, Dingell staffer David Leach had to explain to House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich that the bill actually compelled the Post Company to pay something for a license that it might otherwise get for free. House Subcommittee held an emergency hearing at which members from both parties castigated a PacTel executive, and the Energy and Commerce Committee staff prepared a fact sheet to explain to complicated situation to House members. House members from both level to explain to complicated situation to House members.

In negotiations, the formula changed to mandate that the companies pay 85 percent of the market rate; Mike Mills, "How an Editorial and an Ad Changed the GATT Debate," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 1994.
 Mills, "How an Editorial and an Ad Changed the GATT Debate;" Leach, Interview With Author; "Campaign Bombshell Dropped on Incumbents; Opponents Reveal...Voters Pay Billions in Legislation for Special Favors to Big Media," *Business Wire*, October 4, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1072</sup> Leach, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1073</sup> David Leach provided the author with a copy of this fact sheet from his personal files, along with cover letter dated October 7, 1994 from Chairman Dingell, Ranking Member Carlos Moorhead, and a bipartisan group of five other senior members of the committee and relevant subcommittees; "Pioneer's Preference Financing Defended at Extraordinary Hearing," *Communications Daily*, October 6, 1994; Jeannine Aversa, "Republicans Back Price Break Plan At Special House Hearing," *The Associated Press Political Service*, October 5, 1994.

a lame duck (post-election) session, but only after an agreement between President Clinton and Senate Republican Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) in which the administration committed to working with Congress to make the pioneers retroactively pay more for their licenses if policymakers concluded that the government had not received "a fair return." The outrage spurred by talk radio necessitated both the delay and this agreement by essentially flipping the true meaning of the bill on its head.

As Representative Tom Davis (R-VA) explained, this ability to simplify and define issues enabled talk radio to turn complex policy-driven legislation into a hot button issue that aroused public passions and divided the parties on ideological lines. 1076 Republican aide Brett Shogren expanded on this point, noting that this transformation occurred most often on issues about which members did not have strong views. On the biggest and most deeply philosophical issues, this power dissipated, replaced by the capacity to mobilize members to follow their instincts. 1077 According to Davis, these transformations put Republicans who supported legislation on its merits in an impossible position politically, because they dramatically enhanced the risk of such support.

#### **Positive Impact on Legislation**

Once Republicans had unified control of government, conservative hosts had some additional impact, or a slightly different impact on legislation. Talk radio helped far more than it hindered as Republicans tried to enact their agenda. Hosts worked to spread the Republican message, and to focus attention on bills winding their way through the legislative process. Yet, hosts also insisted that Republicans pursue the most conservative agenda possible and criticized

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1074</sup> Mills, "How an Editorial and an Ad Changed the GATT Debate;"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1075</sup> Leach, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1076</sup> Tom Davis, Interview With Author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1077</sup> Brett Shogren, Interview With Author.

any deviation from their preferred policy line. The implicit electoral threat posed by talk radio gave the medium substantial influence over the agenda when Republicans controlled Congress. Some Republicans would not support any legislation that prominent talk radio hosts opposed for fear of emboldening potential primary challengers or facing a firestorm of criticism. This posture undoubtedly affected what bills made it onto the floor, and the content of those bills.

When Congress debated legislation that appealed to conservative hosts they fiercely advocated for it. Yet, the power of talk radio as a positive force in the legislative process had real limits. 1079 The vast majority of congressional aides and legislators interviewed for this project reported never employing talk radio to try to sway undecided lawmakers before a close vote. Many actually felt that such a move would have backfired. Instead, during close legislative fights, Republicans utilized talk radio to rally their base to support a position or a bill. These efforts were not always particularly effective because of the structure of the legislative process and the limited reach of the conservative base.

Passing controversial, ideologically driven legislation generally required sixty votes in the Senate (to overcome a filibuster), which required procuring Democratic votes for legislation. Talk radio pressure had less impact on Democrats, especially on the biggest issues, because of their liberal leaning constituencies. Additionally, since the talk radio era began in 1988, outside of four years and four months between 2001 and 2006, Republicans faced either Democratic controlled government (1993-1995 & 2008-2010) or some form of divided

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1078</sup> Christopher Shays, Interview With Author, August 11, 2013; Other interview subjects echoed this contention in different terms or with regard to specific legislation or programs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1079</sup> Berry and Sobieraj find "outrage media" not to be "particularly effective" at setting the agenda; Berry and Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry*, 196-197.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1080</sup> During the talk radio era, which I define as beginning in 1988 when Rush Limbaugh started broadcasting nationally, Republicans have never had unified control of the government with more than fifty-five Republican senators.

government, necessitating compromise. Compromise, however, was fundamentally incompatible with talk radio's demand for the most conservative version of legislation possible. For example, in 1995, Republicans planned a test vote on a controversial version of the Balanced Budget Amendment that required sixty percent support for any tax increase. If the test vote produced close to the requisite 290 votes, the leadership intended to recess the House for a day to allow talk radio hosts to gin up support. Limbaugh had hammered House Republicans for the previous week because they suggested that they lacked the votes to pass an amendment including this provision. After the amendment failed, Limbaugh read off the names of the eight Republicans who opposed it on his radio show. But the provision failed in spite of this advocacy. Hosts could do little to build support among Democrats for such legislation, and it, in turn, could not pass without some Democratic support.

Talk radio had more success in motivating Republican controlled government to act on visceral, narrow issues. Many legislators might have grumbled privately about acting on these matters, but saw a fight as unproductive—the issues simply did not have sufficiently far reaching consequences. Talk radio succeeded merely by raising the profile of these issues and convincing Republicans of their import; rarely did a powerful organized interest exist on the other side of the issue. For example, in 2005, members of Congress dashed back to Washington, interrupting a recess, to pass extraordinary legislation to allow the federal courts to intervene in the case of Terri Schiavo. Schiavo had spent fifteen years in a persistent vegetative state, and her parents and her husband had been battling in court for years about whether to remove a feeding tube that kept

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1081</sup> Glenn Kessler, "GOP has a Secret Weapon to Pass Balanced Budget," *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* via *Newsday*, January 24, 1995, A8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1082</sup> Doug Sword, "Big Guns Can't Sway Hostettler New Congressman Bolts Party On Vote," *The Evansville Courier*, January 27, 1995, 6A; Doug Sword, "Hostettler's no gadfly, despite balanced-budget vote," *The Evansville Courier*, January 28, 1995.

her alive. After the Florida courts dealt her parents several defeats, doctors removed Schiavo's feeding tube, prompting Congress to intervene. Talk radio clamored for congressional action—

Sean Hannity pressed House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) to negotiate differences between the House and the Senate approaches to intervention with Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA). Hannity devoted most of his program to the topic on the Friday before Congress acted (the law passed in the wee hours of Monday morning). House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) believed that talk radio successfully framed the issue for legislators and listeners because the case involved a human being, and people could empathize. Nonetheless, the personal, emotional issues where talk radio could play a major role in bringing legislation into being were few and far between.

#### The Invisible Impact of Talk Radio

On a more macro-level, talk radio substantially contributed to cultural changes in Congress, most especially in the Senate, that made legislating far more challenging. For example, *Act of Congress*, Robert G. Kaiser's opus on the road to financial regulatory reform in 2009 and 2010, depicted how every time Senate Banking Committee Chairman Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Ranking Member Richard Shelby (R-AL) seemed close to a bipartisan agreement, Shelby hardened his position. At times, Shelby also seemed hamstrung by his caucus from negotiating freely.<sup>1085</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1083</sup> Steven Thomma, "Federal Response Shows Conservatives' Sway," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 21, 2005; Sean Hannity and Pat Halpin, "Is It Immoral to Cut Off Brain-Damaged Woman's Feeding Tube," *Hannity and Colmes*, The Fox News Channel, March 18, 2005; Sean Hannity and Pat Halpin, "Can Congress Still Save Terri Schiavo," *Hannity and Colmes*, The Fox News Channel, March 18, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1084</sup> J. Dennis Hastert, Interview With Author, June 11, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1085</sup> Robert G. Kaiser, *Act of Congress: How America's Essential Institution Works, and How it Doesn't* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

It would have been unimaginable for a powerful Senate committee chair or ranking member to have faced such constraints in the 1960s. Subsequent rules changes, however, took away much of the power and autonomy of committee chairs, which, in turn, empowered talk radio to a degree. 1086 Nowhere did Kaiser mention talk radio. Yet, Shelby's behavior illustrated its invisible, cultural impact. Kaiser explained that Shelby dreamed of becoming Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman, which made him leery of crossing Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY). Additionally, the Republican members of a committee selected the ranking Republican by vote, not simply by seniority. This arrangement meant that Shelby had to safeguard against colleagues viewing him as disloyal. Supporting a bill that only garnered a few Republican votes risked prompting politically perilous accusations of being a Republican In Name Only (especially as a former Democrat). 1087 Whether explicitly or not, talk radio fit into this calculation because a concerted talk radio campaign against Shelby ascending to be the ranking Republican on the Appropriations Committee would influence the decision of committee Republicans. They would have nothing to gain<sup>1088</sup> and plenty to lose from risking talkers' wrath by making Shelby chairman. Additionally, if conservative talkers wanted to impede Shelby from ascending to the chairmanship, they had a proven ability to trigger enormous constituent pressure on Republican committee members.

Moreover, talk radio hosts had another silent effect on this process because they stood poised to call attention to any concessions that Shelby made. Whereas, twenty-five years earlier negotiations between two senior members could happen quietly in private, talk radio provided a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1086</sup> See Julian Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggles to Reform Congress and Its Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Barbara Sinclair, *Party Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) for good descriptions of the rules changes in Congress that shifted the center of power.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1087</sup> Kaiser, *Act of Congress*, 249 & 265.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1088</sup> The only potential incentive for Republican senators to abide by seniority in selecting a committee leader would be that as they gained seniority, there would be a great chance that it would be honored.

sympathetic outlet to which a disgruntled party could leak details of a negotiation. In other words, Shelby could not count on any concession that he made escaping notice and opprobrium as it once might have. This risk reflected the dramatically increased accountability of members of Congress that talk radio fostered. Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-TX) considered this change to be talk radio's major impact on the legislative process and public policy. Armey believed that this accountability made it far harder to pass legislation through regular order. In his words, politicians did not respond to increased accountability with "very much courage." Instead, they often resorted to passing vague legislation in moments of crisis, and allowing the executive branch to fill in the details.

This transparency posed risks to Shelby beyond committee positions. Although Shelby was one of the Senate's premier fundraisers (as of March 31st 2015, he had more than \$18 million in the bank)<sup>1090</sup>, he hailed from the conservative state of Alabama, which had not elected a Democrat to the Senate since Shelby himself in 1992.<sup>1091</sup> Thus, he had to fret about the risk of a primary challenge far more than a general election race. This, too, fit with the general pattern of talk radio's role in the political process.

These indirect, longterm effects represented the playing field that Republicans faced when trying to legislate in the talk radio era.

#### The Temptation To See The Handiwork of Talk Radio Everywhere

Talk radio's regular polemics against legislation made overstating the medium's impact on public policy easy and tempting. After all, many bills that talk radio maligned over the last

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1089</sup> Dick Armey, Interview With Author, March 7, 2013.

<sup>1090</sup> This information comes from the FEC's sortable database: http://www.fec.gov/data/CandidateSummary.do.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1091</sup> Shelby won election as a Democrat in 1986 and reelection in 1992. He changed parties after Republicans gained control of the Senate after the 1994 elections.

twenty-seven years never became law. Nonetheless, the longterm fate of the Fairness Doctrine provided a cautionary note as to how much credit talk radio deserved for preventing legislation. 1092 Twice after the FCC repealed the regulation, only presidential vetoes thwarted large bipartisan majorities from imposing it statutorily (1987 and 1989). 1093 In 1993, however, a sympathetic Democratic president removed this obstacle. At a 1993 House Subcommittee hearing, Ranking Republican Member Jack Fields (R-TX) emphasized the bill's "strong bipartisan support." 1094 A 1993 poll also showed that 61% of Americans supported reimposing the Fairness Doctrine, while only 11% opposed it. 1095 Thus, from all angles the path looked clear for reimplementation of the doctrine. Subsequently, however, Limbaugh and other conservative hosts agitated against the bill, telling their audiences that it endeavored to silence them. They urged listeners to bombard Congress with phone calls demanding that the Fairness Doctrine remain dead. The press reported that, experiencing an outpouring of hostility, Subcommittee Chairman Ed Markey (D-MA) and other proponents of fairness stopped pushing the issue; the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1092</sup> Randolph, "Limbaugh, Now Insider;" Merida, "Limbaugh Saluted as Majority Maker;" Rod Dreher, "Congress Cowers to Conservatives on Fairness Doctrine," *The Washington Times*, July 3, 1994.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1093</sup> Fairness in Broadcasting Act of 1987, HR 934, 100th Cong., 1st. sess., Congressional Record (June 3, 1987): 14538-39; Fairness in Broadcasting Act, S742, 100th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (April 21, 1987): 9114; Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Senate In Returning Without Approval The Fairness in Broadcasting Bill," June 19, 1987, <a href="http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/061987h.htm">http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/061987h.htm</a>; Helen Dewar, "Senate Ducks Showdown Over Fairness Veto," The Washington Post, June 24, 1987; "Fairness Doctrine Passes Legislative Test in the House," The Wall Street Journal, October 4, 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1094</sup> House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, *Broadcasters and the Fairness Doctrine: Hearings*, 103rd Cong., 1st sess., 1993, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1095</sup> Americans Talk Issues Foundation #22--Improving Democracy in America, Mar, 1993, accessed via the iPoll Database.

bill never came to a vote in either house of Congress. 1096 Based on these reports, one might conclude that talk radio killed the Fairness Doctrine.

Yet, in reality, at most, talk radio played a small role in the doctrine's permanent demise. By 1993, the media landscape had shifted substantially in the six years since the Fairness Doctrine's repeal without the sky falling. The number of broadcasting outlets had increased (with the expansion of cable, the nascent satellite industry, a viable fourth network (Fox launched in 1986), etc) and promised to increase further with the development of the much discussed information superhighway. In this new environment, justifying the Fairness Doctrine's infringement upon broadcasters First Amendment rights became harder, which reduced support for its reimplementation. Moreover, the doctrine appeared less fair than in the past because it only applied to broadcasters, not to the burgeoning number of cable outlets. Additionally, the thinking among many key legislators and staffers had moved away from regulating content and towards trying to encourage the creation of more viewpoints and outlets. The relevant House and Senate committees had also just come off of a bruising 1992 fight to override a presidential veto of the Cable Act. They faced a packed agenda for 1993—especially the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which needed to produce a universal health care bill. The battle also appeared as if it would be more challenging than it had been in the past. Limbaugh's rise reduced Republican support for the Fairness Doctrine, as Republicans saw themselves as finally having an outlet. More generally, Republicans had also become more unified and militant, which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1096</sup> Cliff Kincaid, "Limbaugh, Leftward Into Limbo; Look Out, Rush, The American Right Is Starting to Hate You Too," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1994; Harry A. Jessell, "Congress Urges FCC To Deal With Fairness Doctrine," *Broadcasting and Cable*, March 14, 1994; Bill Holland, "Markey Feeling the Heat on Fairness Doctrine," *Billboard*, October 16, 1993. Jim Cooper, "Talkers Brace For Fairness Assault (Radio Talk Show Hosts; Reinstatement of the Fairness Doctrine of Equal Air Time For Political Speech) (Radio 1993), *Broadcasting and Cable*, September 6, 1993; Kim McAvoy, "Who's to Blame For Cable Reg Mess (Cable Television Regulations), *Broadcasting and Cable*, October 4, 1993.

diminished Republican support for any Democratic bill. Finally, religious broadcasters opposed the Fairness Doctrine more vocally and actively than they had in the past, and all broadcasters uniformly opposed it. By contrast, no organized lobby existed to support it.<sup>1097</sup>

In this environment, key legislators and their staff shied away from a potentially arduous battle that would not be worth the effort given their other priorities and the changed media landscape. All of these calculations, more so than public pressure from Limbaugh and his peers, struck the final nail in the Fairness Doctrine's coffin. In so much as it affected the debate, talk radio's impact came from the understanding that reimplementing the doctrine would be a difficult legislative slog with real costs to the broader Democratic agenda. Overall however, appearances to the contrary, Limbaugh ought not receive credit for killing the Fairness Doctrine. 1098

#### **Conclusion**

Talk radio influenced numerous legislative battles, and played a role in altering power structures and culture on Capitol Hill. While the cases do not provide a clear model that delineates the circumstances under which talk radio affected legislation, a few patterns emerge. Talk radio was better at disrupting or killing legislation (or individual provisions in larger bills) than propelling a bill across the finish line. It was more effective, in part, because the Senate rules only required winning over a mere forty-one senators. Hosts found vanquishing the elected Republican leadership in the more hierarchical House of Representatives to be a more formidable task. Talk radio might throw a monkey wrench into the works, but at least before the second decade of the twenty-first century (by which point many of the tools that the House

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1097</sup> Gerry Waldron, Interview With Author, November 27, 2013; Eddie Fitts, Interview With Author, April 17, 2014; Catherine Nolan, Interview With Author; January 14, 2014; Tom Cohen, Interview With Author, January 28, 2014; David Leach, Interview With Author, January 23, 2014; Kristan Van Hook, Interview With Author, March 13, 2014; Toni Cook Bush, Interview With Author, January 21, 2014: Jack Goodman, Interview With Author, January 21, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1098</sup> Ibid.

leadership had traditionally used to keep the rank and file in line—such as earmarks—had ceased to exist), victory proved elusive. Talk radio had a greater impact on issues (like immigration) that produced visceral responses from listeners, and/or fit into one of the themes that hosts regularly discussed. Even the more technical legislation that talk radio influenced involved issues that could be distilled into something more fundamental and basic. The more controversial and emotional the issue, the better it fit with talk radio's primary goals—entertainment and holding the largest audience possible for the maximum possible time. The immigration debate demonstrated that even in a contested legislative arena in which many other groups became involved on all sides of an issue, talk radio mattered. The medium framed issues in a way that prompted listeners to call their members of Congress. Talk radio often worked hand in glove with grassroots conservative groups; hosts provided a critical megaphone and, often, a unifying message for these foot soldiers Additionally, hosts channeled what might otherwise be inchoate and disorganized conservative anger into a legislative campaign.

Much of talk radio's impact derived from changes wrought by the medium (and in the second half of the 2000s, its progeny) in the culture and the calculations on Capitol Hill. Talk radio increased the transparency of the legislative process, which made it more challenging for risk adverse members of Congress to legislate. Increasingly with time, Republicans had to fear primary challenges, which limited their ability to compromise on what talkers viewed as matters of fundamental principle. Talk radio also prevented them from obscuring responsibility for provisions that might displease base voters. Especially on many less salient issues, talk radio could alter the way that a small, but critical, segment of the electorate perceived the issue without other media even offering much coverage. In many cases this rendered legislation dead on arrival

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because talk radio listeners were the Americans most invested in the debate, and they disliked the proposed legislation.

The advent of cable news and the internet reduced the ability of talk radio to dominate a debate. Yet, conversely, when talk radio agreed with the blogosphere and cable news on a legislative debate (which occurred frequently), talk radio had a greater chance of influencing legislation, as occurred during the immigration debate. With time and technological development it also became easier to affect legislation in the House of Representatives, as alternative and social media, including talk radio, spawned a new generation of celebrity legislators who could freely buck leadership with relative impunity.

## The Conservative Media Empire

Although this dissertation did not treat cable television and the blogosphere, many of my findings drawn from a close study of the history of talk radio apply to cable news and the blogosphere as well. Simply put, all three new media formed one network of friendly competitors. They covered many of the same topics, and formulated and utilized many of the same tropes and frames. All three reinforced the messages broadcast by one another, and functioned similarly in the political process. How did the development of cable news and the blogosphere affect the political impact of talk radio? While the proliferation of ideological news sources reduced the power of talk radio, simply because it ended talk radio's monopoly on speaking to the Republican base in an unfiltered manner, it created a larger ecosystem of ideological news outlets that often worked together to be even more politically potent.

In many ways, the blogosphere, talk radio, and cable news could not help but work in concert because many of the same personalities cross-populated the three media. From its

inception, Sean Hannity, who later became the second most important talk radio host in the country, served as one of Fox News' primetime hosts. Similarly, Bill O'Reilly, another Fox star, had a radio show from 2002 to 2009, and Glenn Beck, another significant talker, hosted a Fox News program from 2009 to 2011. Furthermore, many local and national talk radio hosts appeared regularly on Fox, either as guests, or guest hosts, including Laura Ingraham, Lars Larson, and Mike Gallagher. Even some of Fox News's liberal guests were talk radio hosts, including Leslie Marshall. 1099 Similar connections abounded between the blogosphere and talk radio. In 2006, 2010, and 2014 respectively, Salem Communications, which owned a network of talk radio stations, purchased conservative opinion sites Town Hall, Hot Air, and Red State. As the internet grew, many conservative talk radio hosts added columns for conservative media sites including Town Hall and News Max. In the opposite direction, in 2011, Erick Erickson, the editor of Red State, began hosting an Atlanta talk radio program after a stint as a CNN commentator. Additionally, conservative talkers received much of their information from conservative print and web publications, some of which even had financial relationships with the radio programs.

More fundamentally, talk radio provided a blueprint for these other conservative media. Each medium required certain unique stylistic elements (for example talk radio possessed greater intimacy than television). Nonetheless, talk radio demonstrated that an entertainment driven conservative mass medium could be highly profitable. It offered a template that centered around boldly stated, unambiguous conservative analysis. Although discussion covered many apolitical topics, a conservative cultural worldview steered these conversations, as it would at a

1099 The same pattern existed in liberal opinion media. Ed Schultz, one of the most significant liberal radio hosts during the 2000s, hosted a daily MSNBC program beginning in 2009. For a period before Air America left the airwaves, Rachel Maddow broadcast on both MSNBC and Air America, etc.

conservative dinner table. These media had a chip on their shoulders—their pugnacious style included covering issues important to conservatives that other media outlets ignored. They also maligned, challenged, and discredited (in the eyes of their audience) the mainstream media. This talk radio template institutionalized the claims of media bias that existed on the right dating back to the 1960s (if not before), and indulged the grievances of conservatives toward the "liberal establishment." Finally, while many talk radio and cable news programs had panels or debates that included liberals, conservative had built-in advantages in these discussions (for example, the *Fox News* program "The Five" frequently featured four conservatives and one liberal on its panel). After all, the conservative audience wanted a place where they could celebrate their views, and watch the "good guys" pummel the opposition.

As ideological media outlets proliferated, the talk radio model also changed journalists' role in politics. This template fused news and entertainment into "infotainment," in which factual accuracy or political significance mattered less than selecting stories that lent themselves to an entertaining presentation and to fitting into a conservative narrative. This style of broadcast shattered journalists role as gatekeeper, reporting only what they considered to be newsworthy and substantiated. The talk radio model created an alternative set of gatekeepers, with very different criteria for newsworthiness that accommodated more salacious or less verified stories.

Once talk radio or cable news discussed a story, pressure mounted on mainstream outlets to cover it. Blogs functioned slightly differently, if only because anyone could blog or tweet (using the microblogging site Twitter) anything. The new media ecosystem fostered by the talk radio model worked something like a conveyer belt—stories that started with a tweet or on smaller

sites moved their way up the ideological media food chain, before personalities with sufficient bandwidth forced them into the mainstream media. 1100

Politically, cable news and the blogosphere provided parties, candidates, and elected officials with alternative channels through which to reach local or ideologically segmented audiences with an unfiltered message. The development of these media reduced the power of talk radio in the way that the opening of a town's second supermarket would lessen the import of the preexisting supermarket. As the only game in town, conservative talkers had possessed greater leverage than they did once politicians had a plethora of potential ideologically oriented outlets to access. More voices could dilute their impact in a debate, depending on the unity of conservative media. Additionally, while talk radio hosts could still shut down the Capitol Hill switchboard, so too could cable television hosts and bloggers.

Although talk radio hosts typically preached from the same basic hymnal as cable television hosts and bloggers, the advent of these media also created new business pressures that might help to explain talk radio's diminished tolerance for moderates and compromise over time. Hosts risked appearing inauthentic or insufficiently independent if they defended Republicans for compromising during divided government while blogs and cable news hosts lashed out at such traitorous behavior. Also, the proliferation of media and social media options in the 2000s pressured hosts to be increasingly outrageous, provocative, or otherwise unique, to differentiate their shows and garner attention amidst far greater competition for those consumers looking for a conservative perspective in the media.

they define attention backbones as more trafficked websites that "amplify less-visible individual voices on a specific subject." Here I broaden this term to include websites, but also talk radio and cable news programs; Benkler, et. al., "Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA Debate." *The Berkman Center for Internet & Society Research Publication Series* no. 2013-16 (July 2003). <a href="https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2013/social\_mobilization\_and\_the\_networked\_public\_sphere">https://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2013/social\_mobilization\_and\_the\_networked\_public\_sphere</a>

Additionally, technological advancements enabled partisan operatives, offering more and more effective options for messaging to their base. Pat Toomey's 2004 campaign saw talk radio and Fox News, which had become the news channel for conservative viewers, 1101 as the best way to target a message to the very conservative, politically active voters who the campaign felt would be sympathetic to their message. Thus, the campaign invested heavily in advertisements on Rush Limbaugh's program and Fox News. Yet, subsequently, as campaign manager Mark Dion, explained, technology enhanced the number of tools that operatives had to target a message to a similar set of voters. After 2004, "geotargeting," in which a campaign could message to all people in a zip code who visited a particular website, became possible, thereby lessening the need to utilize talk radio.

Indeed, in some ways, cable news and the blogosphere offered advantages over talk radio in disseminating a message. For example, Senator Bob Bennett noted that the blogosphere could be more potent because blogs provided the same type of content as talk radio, but without time constraints or substantial (unavoidable) advertisements. Additionally, Bennett observed that blog posts could be emailed to friends and relatives. The trusted nature of the source of this information rendered it highly durable and hard for politicians to dislodge. 1102

Yet, as Jamieson and Cappella's idea of an echo chamber conveyed, these media often worked together as parts of a cohesive, if uncoordinated, operation. When they did, their collective power exceeded the power of talk radio alone. Thus, in many cases, Fox News and the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1101</sup> A series of four Specter campaign primary polls indicated that between 66 and 74 of respondents watched Fox News regularly or sometimes. Campaign Pollster Glen Bolger shared this polling data with me in an email; Glen Bolger E-mail Message to Author, September 16, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1102</sup> Bennett, Interview With Author, January 4, 2013; The research of Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler supports Bennett's intuition. Their experimental study found that ideological subgroups failed to update their beliefs when presented with corrective information that ran counter to their predispositions. In several cases, they found that corrections actually strengthened misperceptions among the most strongly committed; Nyhan and Reifer, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32 (June 2010): 303-330.

blogosphere served as force multipliers that enhanced the impact of talk radio on a legislative debate or an election. Whereas in the pre-blog and Fox News days, a talk radio host only reached his or her audience when discussing a candidate or a piece of legislation, today, the network of likeminded bloggers could disseminate his or her comments more widely. Fox News might also invite the host for a guest appearance to discuss the topic. Similarly, Fox News hosts, bloggers, and radio talkers often advocated for the same candidates and policies. To return to the supermarket model, these competitors could often function as a chain, providing the advantages afforded by economies of scale, including brand recognition, greater shelf space, cross-promotion, etc.

Even the relative advantages that Bennett mentioned the blogosphere as providing diminished as talk radio's web footprint expanded. As the internet burgeoned, many talk radio hosts built a substantial web presence to complement their radio programs. These sites usually offered some content for free, and then sold subscriptions for access to bonus content, or the ability to listen to shows commercial free, etc. Politically, these sites enhanced and reinforced the message that the hosts conveyed on the air. For example, the transcripts posted on Limbaugh's website (only paid subscribers could listen or watch Limbaugh's broadcasts) often provided a visual complement to Limbaugh's arguments that compensated for the lack of sound effects or other audio elements that he might have utilized on the air. For example, on April 21st, 2004, Limbaugh explained to his listeners, "They're trying to make something out of John Kerry that he's not. He's not a living human being. He is Lurch. He comes walking in the Addams Family. This is a guy that will not get noticed when he walks into a room unless somebody, some aide comes in, 'All talking stop, John Kerry The Great is here." The transcript from this segment included a poster for the "new" Addams family, which featured Kerry as Lurch, and other

Democratic luminaries, including Ted Kennedy, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and James Carville in the other roles. To fit with Limbaugh's typical depiction of Kennedy, the senator held a liquor bottle in the poster.<sup>1103</sup> Similar to blog links, listeners who enjoyed a segment could share these pages with friends or family members.

In the case of fundraising, technological advancements only enhanced the power of talk radio. As internet fundraising became increasingly prevalent, national talk radio could more effectively drive dollars to a campaign because people could donate using the campaign's website. Additionally, hosts, such as Hugh Hewitt, could link from their own blogs to the websites of candidates who they supported. Blogs could similarly drive funds to a campaign by endorsing a candidate, linking to his or her website, and encouraging readers to donate. However, as fundraiser Jordan Gehrke noted, the blogosphere possessed less power in this regard than talk radio, simply because people did not stare at the same blog for multiple hours a day. 1104

From a utilization standpoint, most politicians and their aides viewed cable news, talk radio, the blogosphere, and social media as complimenting one another. Dave Hodgden worked in the Senate Republican Conference television and radio studio beginning in 1990. Over time, Hodgden observed that new technologies made utilization of new media easier, and fostered an all of the above communications strategy. Senators took advantage of improved cell phone technology to do radio appearances from their homes, cars, or even while waking between their offices and the Senate floor. Additionally, the conference added video servers that recorded senators' television appearances. A senator's press secretary could access these recordings in real time from his or her desktop. He or she could clip a relevant soundbite from an appearance on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1103</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Trying to Breath Life Into Lurch," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, April 21, 2004, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/04/21/trying">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/04/21/trying</a> to breath life into lurch.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1104</sup> Gehrke, Interview With Author, August 28, 2013.

Fox News, and pass it along as a video or audio file in an email to important home state bloggers and radio hosts for use on their programs or in their blogs. Thus, while cable news and the blogosphere provided politicians with additional outlets for navigating around the mainstream media, in many cases they chose all of the above, including talk radio. As time progressed, many of the communications strategies and structures discussed in this dissertation existed with regard to cable news and the blogosphere as well (i.e. holding events such as bloggers rows, which were similar to radio rows).

Overall, talk radio, the blogosphere, and cable news formed one network. They were intricately involved with one another, and provided a largely consistent message. Politically, the proliferation of ideological news sources reduced the power of talk radio by ending its' monopoly on speaking to the Republican base in an unfiltered manner. Yet it also produced a larger ecosystem of ideological media outlets that often worked cohesively, which enhanced the political impact.

# **The Big Picture**

December 23rd, 2014 found Rush Limbaugh in a jovial mood as he broadcast his last show before beginning a twelve day holiday vacation. He discussed a variety of less serious topics ranging from Mannheim Steamroller, to the recently deceased Joe Cocker's music, to the leaked emails from Sony that had the public buzzing at that time. Limbaugh mentioned that in one of these emails, Sony executive Amy Pascal suggested that when Daniel Craig's time as James Bond ended, actor Idris Elba would make a good replacement. This suggestion prompted Limbaugh to muse, "James Bond is a fictional character, obviously. James Bond was invented,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1105</sup> Dave Hodgden, Interview With Author, October 23, 2013.

created by Ian Fleming... He was white and Scottish, period. That is who James Bond is. But now Sony is suggesting that the next James Bond should be Idris Elba, a black Briton rather than a white from Scotland. But that's not who James Bond is, and I know it's racist to probably even point this out."<sup>1106</sup> These remarks ignited a firestorm of criticism accusing Limbaugh of racism. The news vacuum around the holidays helped to catapult the story into a major national story.

This imbroglio, however, vividly demonstrated the fundamentally incongruous goals driving talk radio and elected Republicans. Business motives drove talk radio. Hosts and executives aimed to produce the most entertaining product possible in order to profit maximally. Any ideological or political agenda came after this paramount goal. Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum frankly summarized this dichotomy amidst the 2012 backlash after Limbaugh labeled Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke, a "slut." "'He's being absurd, but that's you know, an entertainer can be absurd. He's in a very different business than I am.""

This orientation made talk radio (and other new media) unique in the political process precisely because, unlike most other actors, its political goals were secondary or tertiary. In chasing profits however, talk radio had unwittingly stumbled upon a segment of the American population that felt poorly served by the media before Limbaugh entered the national scene. Hosts provided a voice for these alienated listeners, and amplified a shared worldview. Many observers scornfully viewed talk radio listeners as mindless robots manipulated by hosts. Yet, that characterization ignored the extent to which hosts effectively harnessed this collective worldview to analyze bills, issues, and politicians that the audience might otherwise miss. This

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1106</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Is There Any Lighthearted News, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, December 23, 2014, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/12/23/is">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/12/23/is</a> there any lighthearted news.

analysis, in turn, shaped how listeners perceived these issues—but for most listeners, their conservative core principles existed absent any influence from talk radio.

In musing about Elba, Limbaugh raised a question about double standards that he, and many in his audience, had long perceived, and he did so in a colorful, accessible, and entertaining way. Unfortunately for Republicans, less than a week later, in a seemingly unrelated development, blogger Lamar White Jr. revealed that House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA) spoke to a white supremacist group in 2002.<sup>1107</sup> After the Scalise scandal broke, Limbaugh's controversial comments also fit neatly into a narrative about persistent Republican and conservative racism. Limbaugh and his brethren had the potential to negatively reflect on the Republican brand because beginning in the late 1980s, talk radio hosts personified a new type of Republican party leader in a broader, coalition style party. Hosts prioritized their preferred policy goals over the electoral needs of the party and the wishes of elected Republicans. They took advantage of a unique ability to influence primary elections to exert influence over the party's direction and policy positions. When Limbaugh returned after the holidays, he reacted pugnaciously and blasted the media for attempting to silence people who raised questions about double standards. While, in this case, no one put the two pieces together, and the Scalise scandal fizzled, it clearly illustrated the risk and the divergent interests between talk radio and elected Republicans. The remarks undoubtedly benefitted Limbaugh with his listeners—feeding the belief that he championed their views, even at the risk of a torrent of criticism. Conversely, amidst the Scalise situation, Republicans could ill afford a prominent member of their coalition

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1107</sup> Michael Calderone, "How Blogger Lamar White, Jr. Landed The Steve Scalise White Supremacist Scoop," *The Huffington Post*, December 30, 2014, <a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/30/lamar-white-jr-scalise-blogger\_n\_6397078.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/30/lamar-white-jr-scalise-blogger\_n\_6397078.html</a>; Jake Sherman and John Bresnahan, "Steve Scalise's Office: Likely He Spoke to White Supremacist Group," *Politico*, December 29, 2014, <a href="http://www.politico.com/story/2014/12/steve-scalise-113854.html">http://www.politico.com/story/2014/12/steve-scalise-113854.html</a>.

fueling a narrative that threatened to distract from the roll out of the newly unified Republican Congress and feed a negative perception about the party.

Yet, regardless of Republican needs, talk radio hosts periodically offered such incendiary analysis because it produced good radio. While hosts believed the substance of what they said, they also sought to present their opinions in a manner that would draw and hold listeners. Being absurd, provocative, controversial, and willing to challenge establishment opinions only benefitted hosts' predominant goal—to build and sustain the largest potential audience that listened to their programs for the maximum possible amount of time. Yet, especially as talk radio grew in prominence, and the biggest hosts assumed massive national platforms, their rhetoric could ensnare Republican politicians.

In 2012, Limbaugh's attack on Fluke prompted the largest backlash of his long career, and became major national news. The outcry entrapped Republican politicians. On the one hand, few desired to anger Limbaugh or his millions of fans, especially in an election year. On the other, ignoring the remarks or defending Limbaugh risked infuriating many non-base voters. Thus, many Republicans tried to thread the needle. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney timidly allowed that, "it's not the language I would have used." Fellow presidential candidate, Ron Paul, acknowledged that the comments "sounded a little crude." These milquetoast responses illustrated Limbaugh's power within the party coalition. Indeed, as the main locus of electoral competition shifted increasingly towards primary elections during the 2000s, hosts' power within the Republican Party grew.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1108</sup> Sarah B. Boxer, "Romney: Limbaugh Remarks 'Not Language I Would Have Used," *CBS News*, March 3, 2012, <a href="http://www.cbsnews.com/news/romney-limbaugh-remarks-not-language-i-would-have-used/">http://www.cbsnews.com/news/romney-limbaugh-remarks-not-language-i-would-have-used/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1109</sup> Gregory Wallace, "Paul Calls Limbaugh Comments 'Crude,' CNN Wire, March 3, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1110</sup> Among the factors driving this change: gerrymandered districts, voter clustering, and geographic polarization, which resulted in only a handful of states having competitive statewide elections.

Hosts were uniquely suited to influence the outcome of a Republican congressional primary because listeners responded to their exhortations as they would if a friend or family member discussed a campaign. Their platform also ideally positioned hosts to boost insurgent primary challengers, because they could help such candidates to overcome two of the major benefits of incumbency—name recognition and fundraising advantages.

In June, 2014, talk radio's unique attributes contributed to one of the most stunning upsets in modern political history when little known economics professor Dave Bratt defeated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (VA) in a Republican primary. News accounts credited talk radio hosts Laura Ingraham and Mark Levin, among others, for Bratt's victory. Bratt also appeared several times on local talk radio, which even when Cantor received equal time, provided far more benefit to the unknown challenger. While proving conclusively that talk radio propelled Bratt to victory would be difficult, nervous elected officials needed no such proof. For them, Bratt's victory magnified the importance of talk radio and its access to reliable, ideologically driven voters in low turnout primaries (voter turnout in the 2014 primary elections reached historic lows—a mere 13.68% of what the Virginia Department of Elections characterized as "active voters" cast ballots in the Bratt-Cantor race). 1111

The involvement of prominent talk radio hosts in unseating the House Majority Leader epitomized the way in which talk radio hosts prioritized the achievement of policy goals over the good of the party electorally. Cantor faced the ire of Ingraham, Levin and other hosts because they disliked the policy positions adopted by the Republican leadership, especially on

<sup>1111</sup> Virginia Department of Elections, "Official Results - Primary Election - June 10, 2014, <a href="http://elections.virginia.gov/Files/ElectionResults/2014/June-Primaries/resultsSW7217.html?type=CON&map=CTY;">http://electionResults/2014/June-Primaries/resultsSW7217.html?type=CON&map=CTY;</a> Commonwealth of Virginia State Board of Elections, "Registrant Counts by District Type Voters Registered as of 2/1/2014 All Localities," <a href="http://elections.virginia.gov/Files/Registration-Statistics/2014/01/">http://elections.virginia.gov/Files/Registration-Statistics/2014/01/</a> Registrant Count By Congressional.pdf.

President Barack Obama, they offered Republicans an outlet to speak to their base, they championed Republicans in general elections, and provided countless other forms of assistance. In fact, five months later, on the eve of the general election, Limbaugh confronted a caller who charged that he and other hosts risked depressing Republican turnout by wondering aloud whether Republicans would disappoint if they gained control of the Senate. Limbaugh did not equivocate as he urged listeners to vote. "The objective here is stopping the Democrats. I don't care if the Republican Party isn't ideal and perfect. If we don't stop the Democrats, everything else is academic. There is no upside for the Democrats winning. There is no upside. There's no way to teach the GOP establishment, if you think this is necessary, a lesson by not voting." Simultaneously, however, hosts also zealously guarded their independence. They rarely hesitated to intervene in primaries on behalf of the candidate who best represented their vision for the party, even if that candidate was not the most electable.

Their perceived potency in primary elections also empowered hosts to influence the policymaking process. Republicans had to remain vigilant about infuriating hosts, even years before their next election, lest they walk into a career-threatening primary challenge.

Legislatively, talk radio's power stemmed from its ability to make a bill so politically toxic that lawmakers could not support it. On smaller issues, a few hosts negatively spotlighting a bill might do the job. With no organized interest or media outlet on the other side of the debate to counter pressure legislators, and most members of Congress lacking strong convictions, a vacuum existed. Thus, hosts could create a political issue out of a policy debate where one had

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1112</sup> Rush Limbaugh, "Don't Blame Me If Republicans Lose—I'm Telling You The Only Way To Stop Democrats Is to Go Vote," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, November 3, 2014, <a href="http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/11/03/don-t-blame-me-if-republicans-lose-i-m-telling-you-the-only-way-to-stop-democrats-is-to-go-vote">http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/11/03/don-t-blame-me-if-republicans-lose-i-m-telling-you-the-only-way-to-stop-democrats-is-to-go-vote.</a>

not previously existed. Their ample airtime per week (usually fifteen hours) left hosts uniquely positioned to draw attention to issues, votes, and legislative machinations that might otherwise remain below the radar. No longer could votes and dealmaking remain occluded from view. Nor could legislators easily obscure the chain of responsibility for legislative provisions as they might have in the past. This scrutiny changed what John W. Kingdon described as the political stream in the legislative process.

Even on bigger issues with a highly contested legislative playing field, such as immigration reform, talk radio demonstrated its might. This impact changed the culture on Capitol Hill, especially for Republicans, and left many reticent to compromise in the name of governing. Talk radio also provided a potential outlet for conservatives to build support for ideas and tactics opposed by the elected Republican leadership. No longer did backbench members of Congress have to hew the party line or fear repercussions. They knew that they could even withstand an establishment-backed primary challenge thanks to support from ideological media.

Many wonder why, in a politically divided country, liberal talk radio never developed into a counterforce in the political and legislative arenas. Simply put, many liberal hosts failed to understand that their primary goal had to be entertainment. They also faced far more competition for the liberal audience from other media outlets (including other spoken word radio outlets such as National Public Radio and ethnic and racial radio). Structural impediments, including low wattage stations, small promotional budgets, and an audience that had fled from AM talk radio as the content became increasingly conservative during the 1990s, also hampered liberal radio. Nonetheless, these challenges could have been overcome by a better product. But the product was too often dry, boring, predictable, and polemical. Hosts also faced difficulties inherent in

liberalism that made it more challenging to provide the sort of zany, outrageous unscripted type of show that propelled conservative radio.

This failure generated a substantial imbalance in the political realm until at least the mid-2000s when the blogosphere burgeoned and MSNBC moved towards more explicit liberal advocacy (even after these outlets developed, they reached far fewer consumers than the premiere conservative programs). Conservatives regularly lamented that the preponderance of mainstream media outlets provided a liberal perspective and openly scorned conservatism. Undoubtedly, liberal sensibilities oriented the reporting and programming throughout the mainstream media. Nonetheless, most outlets sought to provide balanced reporting, and scrupulously presented both sides of the debate. Because of this emphasis on neutrality and objectivity, "liberal" outlets also freely investigated and critiqued Democratic politicians, which weakened their standing and impeded their policy agenda. Fundamentally, mainstream journalists did not view themselves as protecting or aiding a side in the political realm. By contrast, conservative talk radio and its progeny explicitly advocated for its preferred side in political and policy battles, and only criticized Republicans for being insufficiently conservative. While the mainstream media advanced a liberal worldview, and might have contributed to the increasing cultural liberalism in America, it did not counterbalance the impact of conservative media in specific policy fights. This imbalance had the potential to change public policy.

Ironically, even while its political importance remained substantial or grew, talk radio faced significant new challenges on the business front. As the 2000s progressed, terrestrial radio's advertising-based business model fit increasingly poorly with a polarized and digital world in which publicly traded conglomerates with large debt loads and varied business interests owned most stations. The advent of social media made publicizing offensive remarks and

organizing a boycott against an advertiser or station an instantaneous process. Additionally, internet streaming and archiving meant that hosts' words lived forever, and often reached far beyond their own audiences. Watchdog groups monitored most significant hosts, waiting to pounce on every controversial statement or cringe-inducing phrase. Limbaugh's remarks about Fluke spawned a social media campaign against his advertisers. More than a year later, Cumulus CEO Lew Dickey lamented that the comments had cost his company millions of dollars, with a negative trickle down effect. Limbaugh and Howard Stern, the two transcendent talents in their era of radio, popularized boundary pushing, absurd, and controversial programming. This style, however, fit poorly with a dependence on advertising for revenues, as advertisers wanted to appeal broadly and avoid offending potential customers (this problem, along with conflicts with the FCC, drove Stern to subscription-based satellite radio).

Increasingly, AM radio sought alternatives to the traditional talk radio format. Sports talk became a safe haven for advertisers because, similar to political talk, it stirred listeners' passions, which produced good radio. Yet, it presented far less risk of provoking boycotts. Thus sports radio had a better power ratio—i.e. more revenue per ratings point. Blue chip advertisers also lost some interest in AM talk radio as its audience aged out of the coveted twenty-five to fifty-four demographic. In response, programmers shifted many talk radio stations to the FM band. This switch may eventually prompt experimentation with more moderate, liberal, or eclectic talk formats, because FM listeners are younger and more female (young voters and women tend to be more liberal).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1113</sup> David Hinckley, "Rush Limbaugh Did Cost Our Company Millions, says Cumulus CEO," *The New York Daily News*, May 7, 2013, <a href="http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/cumlus-ceo-rush-limbaugh-cost-millions-article-1.1337380">http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/cumlus-ceo-rush-limbaugh-cost-millions-article-1.1337380</a>.

As of 2015, the possibility exists that AM talk radio eventually goes the way of other once dominant media forms that are slowly ceasing to exist, like the print newspaper. Only time will tell. But most industry observers believe that the era of edgy AM political talk ushered in by Limbaugh's ascendance is coming to a close. The future for ideologically driven political talk programming, however, remains secure. The *content* will remain a vibrant part of our political discourse and a potent political force for decades to come. The delivery mechanism for this content, however, may cease to be AM radio in the years ahead. People wishing to hear their favorite conservative host in twenty years may turn to podcasts or satellite radio. Satellite radio's subscriber model, in which subscriptions, not advertising, provide the profit margins, far better suits controversial content. Hosts do not have to worry about skittish advertisers and corporate bosses who can be pressured by social media campaigns. Additionally, in a world with blogs and podcasts, people may become more resistant to listening to commercials roughly one third of the time. If this transition occurs, it might also advantage more eclectic talk radio," as an internet-based delivery mechanism would have a lower barrier to entry and a different business model.

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Overall, this dissertation inserts talk radio into the historiography of late twentieth and early twenty-first century politics. It argues that talk radio played a major role in the gridlock and elite polarization that plague the political process today. While many other factors have contributed to these developments, including the rise of political groups like the Club For Growth and the Senate Conservative Fund, the emergence of blogs and cable news outlets,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1114</sup> The evidence on the democratizing power of the internet is, at best, mixed; While more people could certainly produce content on the internet than on terrestrial radio, studies of blogs and news sites indicate that the vast majority of this content will reach an audience consisting of family, close friends, and few others. See Matthew Hindman, *The Myth Of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

changes in campaign finance regulation, and voters self-sorting into more ideologically coherent parties, talk radio cannot be ignored as a critical player in the modern political landscape. Talk radio initiated the process through which increasing numbers of Americans lived in echo chambers, and received news only from sources slanted to their political perspective. Even today, as listenership has dropped from its peak and other media exist that occupy the same niche in the political arena, talk radio hosts still draw attention from politicians and the mainstream media, and continue to command large audiences of voters. Most hosts advocate for an unyielding Republican Party that refuses to compromise in the name of governing, and sticks to the principles most important to them. Increasingly with time, hosts have been willing to actively work to reshape the party to better achieve this goal.

Thus, because of this stridency (or commitment to principle depending on one's perspective), temptation abounds to judge the normative contribution of talk radio to American democracy on the basis of one's ideology. Conservatives champion the medium and liberals write it off as a bastion of bigotry. Yet, we ought to resist this temptation, and instead recognize that talk radio has contributed in both positive and negative ways to American political development. It provided an outlet through which many previously alienated Americans could participate. It also increased the transparency of the government and politics, often raising stories that would otherwise never see the light of day. Additionally, hosts encouraged more involved political participation, and provided far more attention to the happenings of government than many other forms of broadcast news or entertainment. On the flip side, talk radio damaged the ability of government to function (depending on one's viewpoint this development can be considered good or bad), offered a slanted perspective, and conflated entertainment and news, which too often meant sacrificing factual accuracy and misinforming the audience. Even the

question of talk radio's impact on democracy itself produces a mixed verdict. Talk radio encouraged democratic participation, but simultaneously, it fed a process through which a smaller and smaller segment of voters dominated American politics. Ironically, given the medium's penchant for simple, unambiguous messages, portraying its impact requires multiple shades of gray that would never make for good talk radio.

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