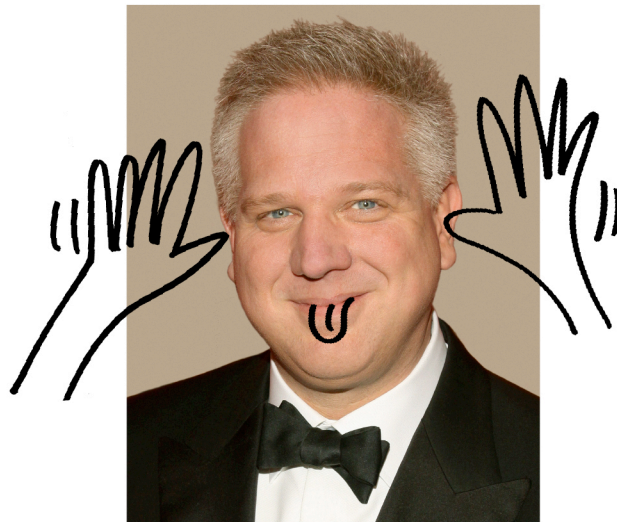




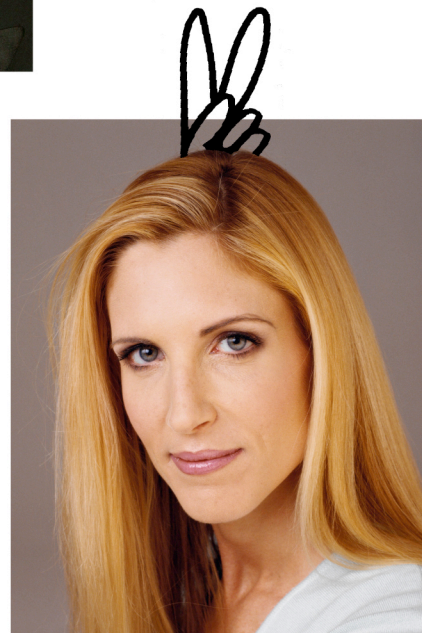
SHAMELESS



The Ethical Case Against
Three Out-of-Control Critics

And the Need for Civility **Now**
More than Ever

Jim Lichtman



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Foreword by Norman Corwin

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Just because the microphone in front of you
amplifies your voice around the world
is no reason to think we have any more wisdom
than we had when our voices could reach
only from one end of the bar to the other.

— *Edward R. Murrow*

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Foreword

Mr. Lichtman is, of course, right in everything he writes about the unholy trio whose very public pronouncements he has selected to analyze.

The point about all three is that what they are doing provides them with a comfortable living. All three know better than what they write and say openly, but they rely on the boobery of their audiences. Let us not forget Mencken's judgment that *boobus Americanus* are numerous, and that means a good living for anybody who feeds them what they want to believe.

But Miss Coulter is a case apart. She is young, reasonably attractive, and has plenty of native wit; she must have looked around and seen that reactionaries are mostly male, and in the case of Limbaugh, distressingly chubby. Apparently, there was nobody in the field who could inspire an erection; thus, the avenues were wide open for her to be noticed and quoted. She made a decision that would guarantee her being noticed, and she succeeded. She makes a good living out of her choice.

As for Beck, he is a troglodyte whose supporters suck his right wing candy as though it were the wisdom of the ages instead of cheap Fox trash.

– Norman Corwin, March 10, 2011

Voices from across the bar

We currently live in a cable news media-induced echo chamber where, much of the time, opinion too easily passes as fact. This is as much the fault of those who listen and believe as it is the opinion makers. Opinion is not fact; it's opinion.

According to Dictionary.com, an "opinion" is "a belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty." A "fact" is defined as "something that actually exists; reality; truth." Example: "Your fears have no basis in fact"; an interesting illustration considering the current state of populist demagoguery that flourishes today.

Journalist Edward R. Murrow famously said, "We cannot make good news from bad practice." When it comes to the current state of some cable news programs, the line between news and opinion has not blurred, it's vanished, and what we're left with is not just bad practice, it's become reckless malpractice.

America has a long history of political discontent, but thanks to the riches of a vast technology we have quickly evolved from instant coffee to all manner of instant information... a *lot* of information. Unfortunately, too much of that information is simply wrong, and when that wrong information concerns issues and individuals upon which the citizenry is charged with making decisions that affect us all, that is more than disturbing, it's dangerous.

In writing and speaking on a variety of ethics-related issues over the last fifteen years, I've remained relatively silent regarding the mouthings of political critics largely because I viewed much of their discourse as typical detritus of partisan discontent. However, as the economy took a downward spiral (in many cases, as a result of the ethical lapses on Wall Street, the housing market, fill in your own blank), the rhetoric went from blustering bombast to rancorous incivility faster than an out-of-control Toyota. Particularly divisive is that which comes from those political critics who have the eyes and ears of millions.

While the press has reported many of their more outrageous statements, management at the media outlets who employ these individuals allow them to continue their abuse with impunity all for the sake of "ratings." However, in a time when many have lost jobs, homes, and hope, this brand of shameless incivility no longer sits on the sidelines. It has become the basis for much of the fear and unreason that has taken hold in the country. In short, the atmosphere has become poisoned with a level of malicious

discourse that is not only intolerable but also astonishingly unethical.

During the past ten months I've been watching, listening, and reading from the gospels of both liberal and conservative opinion media, specifically, Alan Colmes, Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews, and Keith Olbermann from the Liberal camp; Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Bill O'Reilly from the Conservative side.

While both camps are, at times, clearly too loud, self-absorbed, and insufferable, what raises my ethical hackles most comes from the *Unholy Trinity* of political demagoguery: Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and Glenn Beck. Particularly disturbing are two aspects: 1. In spite of brash rhetoric to the contrary, Limbaugh and Beck don't seem to care much about facts (more troubling is that listeners don't seem to let this get in the way of their own thinking); and 2. All three are exceptionally gifted at pandering to the *anger-du-jour*.

When I talk about ethics, I am referring to what ethicist Michael Josephson calls "...standards of conduct which indicate how one should behave based on moral duties and virtues arising from principles about right and wrong." ¹

When referencing standards in my ethical audit of the three, I'll be using those definitions put forth by "thirty national leaders representing schools, teachers' unions, family support organizations, faith communities, national youth service groups, ethics centers, and character education experts." ²

In 1992, these specialists were brought together in Aspen, Colorado by The Josephson Institute of Ethics to develop and agree upon a set of ethical values. The resulting document, *The Aspen Declaration*, affirmed that "[Certain] core ethical values... form the foundation of a democratic society, in particular *trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice & fairness, caring and civic virtue & citizenship*. These core ethical values transcend cultural, religious, and socio-economic differences." ³

As part of my evaluation of Limbaugh, Coulter, and Beck, I'll be using one assessment tool that we all know and recognize – the report card. In looking at my first grade report card, I discovered that, while Sister Mary Robert would record my progress on course subjects, she would also grade me on such things as *courtesy, cooperation, diligence, following the rules, and respects rights of others* – my first introduction to ethical values. The collective total of all grades determined whether I would be "promoted" to the next level.

Following my own written assessment of each, I'll grade and comment with respect to four of the ethical values defined by *The Aspen Declaration* (and promoted by The Josephson Institute where I received my own training).

Trustworthiness –

Being trustworthy encompasses honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, and loyalty.

"*Honesty* in communication," Josephson writes, "requires a good faith intent to be truthful, accurate, straightforward and fair in all communications so that persons are not misled or deceived." ⁴

Integrity refers to "moral wholeness, consistency between principle and practice... Being principled involves making decisions based on ethical principles even when expediency or self-interest would dictate other choices." ⁵

Promise-keeping – "promises and other commitments create moral duties that go beyond legal obligations; they create a legitimate basis for others to rely upon the promise-maker to perform." ⁶

Loyalty "embraces the moral responsibility to promote and protect the interests of persons and organizations." However, there are limitations to loyalty. "Loyalty does not justify violation of other ethical values such as integrity, fairness or honesty. Undue claims in the name of loyalty are themselves acts of disloyalty that forfeit the claims."

One of the characteristics of loyalty, Josephson points out, is avoiding conflicting interests. "Employees and public servants should make all professional decisions using objective, independent judgment on the merits, unimpeded by conflicting personal interests." ⁷

Respect –

The value of respect imposes a moral duty to treat all persons with courtesy, civility, and decency, as well as tolerance, accepting individual differences without prejudice. ⁸

Responsibility –

Responsibility refers to an individual's ability to be accountable, apply self-restraint, and pursue excellence.

"*Accountable* persons consider the possible consequences ahead of time and accept responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of their actions or inactions." ⁹

Self-restraint means that "Ethical people do not adopt win-at-any-cost attitudes." They "maintain self-discipline and self-control...." ¹⁰

"The *pursuit of excellence* has an ethical dimension," Josephson says, "especially when others rely upon our knowledge, ability or willingness to perform tasks effectively." ¹¹

Two important facets of the pursuit of excellence, Josephson asserts, are *diligence* and *continuous improvement*. "It is not unethical to make mistakes or to be less than excellent, but there is a moral obligation to do one's best, to be diligent, reliable, careful, prepared and informed." [Additionally] "Ethical persons continually look for and offer ways to do things better. They are committed to total quality and seek to develop their knowledge, skills and judgment relating to the performance of their duties." ¹²

Civic Virtue & Citizenship –

As citizens, we have "a civic duty that extends beyond one's own self-interests, demonstrating social consciousness and recognizing one's obligations to contribute to the overall public good." Along with voting and paying taxes, civic duties extend to reporting crimes, waste, fraud, and abuse, as well as "giving time and money to charity." ¹³

In my evaluation, I'll use a similar approach that CBS news icon Murrow used in his assessment of subjects, namely weighing their words and tone. Not just the words of Beck, Coulter, and Limbaugh, but their consistency in those words. Not just their tone, but their consistency in that tone.

In forming my opinion I watched, listened, read, and re-read many of their books and transcripts. Further, I'll be looking to answer five questions:

1. Does the public listen to these individuals for news, analysis, and opinion, or is it all just entertainment?
2. How reliable is the information that comes from each of them?
3. How much responsibility do they demonstrate regarding the content and tone of the information they broadcast?

4. Why do some listeners regard many of their statements as truth even when the facts say otherwise?

And finally,

5. Do they ever cross the line of reasoned commentary, and if so, when does it become destructive to society?

First, a little backstory.

Fear and Unreason

During the pioneering days of broadcast journalism, Edward R. Murrow was the gold standard of journalists. Known for his honesty and integrity in reporting the news and clearly identifying his own opinion, I'm afraid Mr. Murrow would be shocked beyond belief if he listened to the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, or Glenn Beck (assuming he only listened to one. Listening to all *three* would have certainly killed him faster than the cigarettes that eventually claimed his life).

On March 9, 1954, Murrow and producing partner Fred Friendly exposed Senate demagogue Joseph R. McCarthy in a special CBS News *See It Now* broadcast. Using their own money to pay for air time, Murrow and Friendly used McCarthy's own words to demonstrate to the American public the reckless and dangerous accusations McCarthy used against any individual he labeled a communist.

At the end of the broadcast, Murrow and Friendly offered McCarthy equal time to respond to their report, and three weeks later, they aired his reply. "...Murrow is a symbol," McCarthy bluntly declared, "a leader, and the cleverest of the jackal pack which is always found at the throat of anyone who dares to expose individual Communists and traitors." ¹

Tens of thousands of letters, telegrams, and phone calls flooded into CBS in support of Murrow's report, and the power and influence of McCarthy began to collapse as he faced his own Senate investigation and eventual condemnation.

When the records of McCarthy's closed hearings were made public in a 2003 report, Senators Susan Collins and Carl Levin wrote, "Senator McCarthy's zeal to uncover subversion and espionage led to disturbing excesses. His browbeating tactics destroyed careers of people who were not involved in the infiltration of our government. His freewheeling style caused both the Senate and the Subcommittee to revise the rules governing future investigations, and prompted the courts to act to protect the Constitutional rights of witnesses at Congressional hearings... These hearings are a part of our national past that we can neither afford to forget nor permit to reoccur."²

In that March 9 program, Murrow highlights an exchange between Senator McCarthy and Reed Harris, a State Department official in charge of broadcasts to foreign countries.

McCARTHY: The question is: did the Civil Liberties Union supply you with an attorney?

HARRIS: They did supply an attorney.

McCARTHY: The answer is 'yes?'

HARRIS: The answer is 'yes.'

McCARTHY: Uh, you know the Civil Liberties Union has been listed as a front for and doing the work of the Communist Party.

HARRIS: Mr. Chairman, this was 1932.

McCARTHY: Yeah, I know this was 1932. Do you know that they since have been listed as a front for, and doing the work of the Communist Party?

HARRIS: I do not know that they have been listed. No sir, no I do not.

McCARTHY: You don't. You don't know they have been listed?

MURROW: The Reed Harris hearing demonstrates one of the Senator's techniques.

Twice he said The American Civil Liberties Union was listed as a subversive front. The Attorney General's list does not and never has listed the ACLU as subversive, nor does the FBI or any other federal government agency. And The American Civil Liberties Union holds in its files letters of commendation from President Truman, President Eisenhower, and General MacArthur.

"Earlier, the Senator asked, 'Upon what meat does this, our Caesar, feed?' Had he looked three lines earlier in Shakespeare's *Caesar* he would have found this line, which is not altogether inappropriate. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.'

"We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and doctrine and remember that we are not descended from fearful men not from men who feared to write, to associate, to speak and to defend the causes that were for the moment unpopular."³

In the end, Murrow paid a price for his integrity. CBS chairman Bill Paley ultimately cancelled *See It Now* due to the journalist's continuing focus on controversial topics. In a speech before the Radio and Television News

Directors Association in 1958, Murrow criticized television for its emphasis on entertainment and commercialism at the expense of the public interest on important issues of the time. His "lights and wires" speech, as it became known, would remain a cautionary diatribe against the excesses of a new medium with far too much power and influence.

And look what has followed since.

Today, we are inundated and insulated by that great, national, attention-deficit-disorder known as 24/7 cable news that is so melded to commentary, hate-speech and "info-tainment" that it has become difficult even for the reasonably well-informed to tell the difference between fact and fiction; even then, too many are willing to believe the fiction over the fact.

And *why*? For some it boils down to one amazingly ignorant reason: They're on television and radio, so they must be right!

In his opening to *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote, "...a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it the superficial appearance of being right...."

Of course, Paine was referring to the various abridgments of freedoms imposed on the colonials by King George. Today, we face a far more critical abridgment by way of millions of citizens turning their thinking over to a handful of talking zealots who fervently believe that God, the founding fathers or their major representatives speak through them to tell the rest of us what to think or how to respond to any given issue or individual.

What began as commentary on these critics quickly expanded into a closer examination of three individuals whose considerable influence threatens America's thinking public. That is not to say that said individuals do not bear their own responsibility in this. They do. But when millions submit to the fear and unreason propagated by populists like Limbaugh, Coulter, and Beck, when those same populists rely on exaggeration, innuendo and outright lies concerning which policy or individual to support, many need to be awakened from their collective coma and apprised of the facts. In short, we need to perform our *own* due diligence into the accuracy and purpose of these people.

This is nothing new to Americans in crisis. Twenty years before Murrow, fear and unreason came in the form of an anti-Semitic, Roman Catholic priest.

Hell's Kitchenette

In his 1996 study, *Radio Priest*, about the rise and fall of populist demagogue Father Charles Coughlin, Donald Warren cites journalist Walter Lippmann who "...argued that modern mass communication created 'pseudo environments' that thwarted the ability of the average citizen to make political judgments based on facts." ¹

Warren goes on to cite philosopher John Dewey's influential volume, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), which "saw emerging electronic media as serving to divide and atomize society...." ²

Both studies, Warren writes, "serve as a critical base for explaining the power of Charles Coughlin and all those who have become his broadcast heirs." ³

While a young priest in Detroit Michigan, Coughlin (pronounced "cawglin") happened to meet his parish bishop, Michael Gallagher on a train. The two "became instant friends... not only because of [Coughlin's] soaring oratory but also for his fund-raising abilities." Soon after, "...Gallagher had something in mind for the super-salesman drive of his young protégé," the establishment of the *Shrine of the Little Flower* in the small but "burgeoning community of Royal Oak." ⁴

After loans were secured and a 600-seat church constructed, Coughlin's fund-raising abilities were soon tested as he discovered that his congregation was comprised of "middle-class families struggling to pay for their own homes and to educate their own children...." ⁵ Asking a local friend and scout for the Detroit Tigers for help, the two invited a number of ball players to the Shrine for a fund-raiser. As fortune would have it, the New York Yankees were in town and one of those in attendance was Babe Ruth. Needless to say, Coughlin's stock was rising as he increased the church's coffers and began to repay the loans.

However, Coughlin needed much more to fulfill his grand vision, not for the Shrine, for himself. It was at this point that he concocted "a fable... that became the basis for an enduring myth recited in all biographies and writing, by critics and friends alike. It concerned opposition to bigotry and especially the Ku Klux Klan. Coughlin claimed to have encountered and opposed anti-Catholic cross burnings early in his career." ⁶

"A Hollywood version of the priest's life, pilot-filmed in 1933, Coughlin's portrayer shouts: 'Bigots! Bigots! I'll construct a church that will stand as a

monument in defiance of hatred!' " ⁷

However, a check of local newspapers confirmed that there was no Klan activity at the *Shrine of the Little Flower* at the time in question. It was all a fiction meant to build the reputation of the future radio priest as a tireless, bigot-fighting symbol of the everyman at the beginning of a nationwide Great Depression.

"The episode of the burning cross," Warren points out, "underscores one of the most basic rules of the successful bigot: to claim the credentials of the anti-bigot.... It was not simply that the priest himself and his closest associates believed it but that those who witnessed his soaring career equated success with virtue." ⁸

Coughlin next asked for and received permission from the bishop to broadcast his sermons on radio. In three short years, this success led the fiery priest to speak on a variety of economic and social issues of the day.

After the 1929 stock market crash, Walter Lippmann wrote, "A demoralized people is one in which the individual has become isolated. He trusts nobody and nothing, not even himself. He believes nothing, except the worst of everybody and everything. He sees only confusion in himself and conspiracies in other men." ⁹

Warren concludes, "Such is the social climate in which Charles Coughlin emerged as a grassroots leader: spokesman for those who had grown distrustful of the establishment's explanations of the overwhelming economic disaster."

Coughlin "...was creating an ecumenism of discontent." ¹⁰

By 1930, Coughlin signed with CBS radio and his popularity began to grow as his attacks focused on issues that hit home. In 1932, emboldened by an average of 80,000 letters per week ¹¹ and his own press-clippings, Coughlin attacked Herbert Hoover as "the bankers' friend, the Holy Ghost of the rich, the protective angel of Wall Street." ¹²

In *The Great Depression*, historian Robert McElvaine writes, "One such radio address against Hoover was said to have elicited 1.2 million letters to Coughlin from his listeners." ¹³

With a listening audience now estimated between 30-40 million per week, ¹⁴ Coughlin was bigger than Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Bill O'Reilly combined. ¹⁵ A first edition of his *Radio Discourses* sold over a million copies;

this, when the resident population in the United States was a modest 123 million.

In 1933, Coughlin focused his Holy War on Detroit bankers, calling them "the den of forty thieves, the hide-out, the blind pig financial institutions where shady transactions are prepared and where are printed the depositors' passports to doom." ¹⁶

My, he could turn a phrase though.

"Having thrown caution to the winds," Charles J. Tull writes in a 1965 biography, "the 'radio priest' boldly attacked the abuses plaguing the American economic scene, always stressing the need to return to the old-fashioned principles of Christian charity." ¹⁷

Remind you of anyone today?

Unlike today's media populists who only intimate their guidance from on high, Coughlin flat-out declared a direct connection to the Almighty. In support of Franklin Roosevelt's presidential bid, Coughlin declared, "The New Deal is Christ's Deal." ¹⁸ And in a Congressional Hearing, the radio priest affirmed that "God is directing President Roosevelt." ¹⁹

Somewhere along the line, however, Roosevelt's New Deal fell out of favor with the Almighty, and He appointed Coughlin his avenging angel. "He who promised to drive the money changers from the temple," Coughlin declared in July 1936, "has built up the greatest debt in history, \$35,000,000,000...I ask you to purge the man who claims to be a Democrat from the Democratic Party, and I mean Franklin Double-Crossing Roosevelt." ²⁰

In September of that year, Coughlin unleashed his full fury. "When any upstart dictator in the U.S. succeeds in making this a one party form of government, when the ballot is useless, I shall have the courage to stand up and advocate the use of bullets. Mr. Roosevelt is a radical. The Bible commands 'increase and multiply,' but Mr. Roosevelt wants to destroy and devastate. Therefore I call him anti-God." ²¹

The cracks in Coughlin's support, however, were already beginning to show. In March 1935, one disenchanted supporter wrote to the priest saying, "I fail to see... more than sheer destructive criticism in your utterances... The mask is becoming dangerously apparent. The tone, as well as the substance of your speeches is... more fascistic than truly democratic." ²²

In a Congressional speech, New York Representative John O'Connor pressed further asserting, "Just because Father Coughlin is an egomaniac he thinks he can run the government. He stepped into the bonus and world court issues, but had as much to do with Congressional action on them as any elevator operator in the Capital." ²³

What began as populist rage on behalf of the working class and the dispossessed morphed into a demagogic nightmare of distortion, lies, and intolerance. By 1936, Coughlin's anti-Semitic beliefs caught up with him. The radio priest claimed that the Depression was brought about by an "international conspiracy of Jewish bankers." And in 1938, two weeks after Germany's *Kristallnacht*, Coughlin declared, "Jewish persecution only followed after Christians first were persecuted." ²⁴

Coughlin's tipping point had come. One Washington District rabbi called on Pope Pius XI for action. "The decent citizens of America, not only of the Jewish faith, but among the most devout Catholics of this country are viewing with growing indignation, the ten years of Father Coughlin's demagoguery and his increasing irresponsibility of the past years, and they turn to the supreme pontiff of the great church of Rome with a petition in their hearts that the prestige of the church of the gentle St. Francis be not dragged into the mire...." ²⁵

Coughlin's power and influence coughed and wheezed until the Church mercifully put an end to his inflammatory broadcasts in 1940.

However, "those who do not learn from history," American philosopher George Santayana famously wrote, "are doomed to repeat it."

While the "Father of Hate Radio," as he became known, had left the political stage, there was no shortage of heirs to pick up his mantle.

House of Pyne

In 1966, I sat before a TV to watch a strange, new kind of entertainment unlike anything I had ever seen before. It began like this...

"*The Joe Pyne Show*, a fascinating forum of funny, famous, infamous, way out, and factual confrontations and interviews with real people... what you are about to see... has delighted audiences into thinking while they are being entertained..." ¹

Sitting behind a plain desk on a non-descript set sat a chain-smoking ex-Marine who lost his leg in World War II. Joe Pyne had a gift for provoking anything and anyone provocative, (something not lost on Bill O'Reilly). Indeed, Pyne's mission was – borrowing the words of Chicago-based writer and humorist Finley Dunne – "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable"; although most times, Joe preferred the latter.

Joe Pyne stood *against* racial discrimination, hippies, homosexuals, feminists, The Ku Klux Klan, and The American Nazi Party. He stood *for* the Vietnam War, labor unions, and the little guy. In fact, Pyne often began his show with a segment called "The Beef Box" where he would invite anyone from his studio audience to step up and "state your beef." However, as his audience quickly discovered, Pyne could turn on them as easily as his guests if he didn't agree with a particular gripe.

When an elderly gentleman steps into the dock to declare his resistance to the war in Vietnam – amid the cheers of many in the audience – Pyne shoots back, "Should we then throw a big block party for the Chinese Reds?" ²

Pyne's colorful and combative shorthand consisted of "meathead," "jerk," "dummy," or "jackass." A more multifaceted oeuvre would have to include "Get off the line, you creep!" "Go gargle with razor blades," and my personal favorite, "I could make a monkey out of you, but why should I take the credit?" In a verbal duel between Rush Limbaugh and Joe Pyne, my money would be on Pyne (if I could find anyone who would bet against him). In fact, Pyne could take down Coulter, Limbaugh, and Beck without working up a sweat.

When Stanley Kohls, a representative of the West Coast Chapter of The War Resister's League, argued that the conflict in Vietnam was a waste of men and resources, Pyne wasted no time hammering the guy, at one point calling Hiroshima and Nagasaki "the greatest thing that ever happened." ³

However, nothing cut to the chase faster than Pyne's signature line usually reserved for extremists: "TAKE A WALK!"

But Pyne's show could easily turn from the outrageous to the outrageously funny as when he interviewed the founder and High Priest of the First Church of Satan.

"Anton Szandor LaVey," Pyne intones, "uses, as a credo, this timeless quote: 'Remember, evil backwards spells *live*.'" ⁴

The audience roars.

Then, there's this exchange between Pyne and James Moseley, co-founder and editor of *Saucer News*, who talked about the planet Clarion.

"Joe, the problem about Clarion," Moseley says matter-of-factly, "it's situated in such a way that you can never see it. Of course, I don't guess you've heard of Clarion."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of Clarion," Pyne says smiling at his audience. "There was a man here, one day, who said he was King Jack-E from Clarion who had his space coupe parked down the street and couldn't get his money exchanged." ⁵

One apocryphal story concerns a battle of wits between Pyne and composer-musician Frank Zappa. Pyne insulted the self-styled opinion-maker when he looked at Zappa's hair and concluded, "So, I guess your long hair makes you a woman," to which Zappa allegedly replied, "So, I guess your wooden leg makes you a table." ⁶

Although the Anti-Defamation League accused Pyne of pandering to bigots, his audience loved him. Outrageous, belligerent, and self-righteous, Pyne was way ahead of Rush Limbaugh, et al.

"I'm not a nice guy and I don't want to be," Pyne told Time magazine in a 1966 interview. "Why should he," Time wrote, "when being so nasty makes him so popular?"

However, the most prescient statement came at the end of that review from Pyne himself: "The subject must be visceral. We want emotion, not mental involvement." ⁷

And guess what we got?

The ego has landed

Not long ago I was invited to an impromptu dinner for eight and found myself seated next to someone I'd never met. After everyone ordered, the gentleman and I began to exchange a few words. In situations where I am unfamiliar with others, I listen, mostly. I discovered that the man next to me comes from the financial sector, is recently retired, and sat on the board of a very prominent corporation.

The table conversation covered a variety of current events from the economy (he came off intelligent and well-informed), to the Boston Red Sox (we're both big fans), to the BP crisis in the Gulf – about which this same man volunteers the following:

"Yup, just like Rush predicted, the oil in the Gulf is breaking up due to the hurricane. There's not much left; no long-term damage."

On his radio show, Limbaugh called what experts have described as the greatest oil disaster in U.S. history, "a leak."

Needless to say, I was interested to know why this savvy financial guy, a man who could impart the specifics on any number of economic indicators, seemed to believe in Rush Limbaugh's oil disbursement and oceanographic expertise.

"Do you listen to Rush often?" I asked.

"I won't deliberately sit by the radio," he said, "but generally, yes."

And here's the real question for me: "Do you believe Rush Limbaugh's commentary is factually correct?"

"Well," he answered, "if he were *wrong* there'd be a list of it somewhere, wouldn't there?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "there is" and offered a couple of resources.

At that moment, you'd think I just told him that the Red Sox's David *Big Papi* Ortiz had just been caught gambling on baseball, using steroids, and cheating on his wife... *all* in the same week!

In an age of hyper-opinion-media, Rush Limbaugh is the *Big Papi* of right-wing talk. Outsized, bombastic, and always in control, Limbaugh is quite literally, the King of the Jungle of talk radio with a listening audience of

somewhere between 15-20 million each week, all of whom wait – apparently with baited breath – for the next gospel from a man who’s self-confidence Jesus Christ would esteem.¹

For three hours a day, five days a week, Rush Hudson Limbaugh III holds forth with “half my brain tied behind my back just to make it fair.”

Lucky for us.

In a Newsweek magazine cover story, *The Power 50*, which ranked the highest paid pundits and politicians, Rush Limbaugh, not surprisingly, “...ranks first with \$58.7 million in annual income – or 34 times [Edward R.] Murrow’s 1952 salary, adjusted for inflation.”² This, when Murrow was at the top of his game.

When it comes to his power and influence, *El Rushbo* – as some fans like to call him – is fearless. In 2009, when Republican Party National Committee Chairman Michael Steele had the temerity to call Limbaugh nothing more than an “incendiary” and “ugly” entertainer, Rush wasted no time taking Steele down in front of the radio host’s considerable fan base.

“Okay, so I am an entertainer, and I have 20 million listeners...Yes, said Michael Steele, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, I’m incendiary, and yes, it’s ugly. Michael Steele, you are head of the RNC. You are *not* head of the Republican Party. Tens of millions of conservatives and Republicans have nothing to do with the RNC and right now they want nothing to do with it, and when you call them asking them for money, they hang up on you....”³

Faster than a Sarah Palin tweet, the RNC chairman backpedaled. “I have enormous respect for Rush Limbaugh... There was no attempt on my part to diminish his voice or his leadership.”⁴

All this grew from Limbaugh’s statement on his January 16, 2009, radio show.

Four days before Senator Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States, Limbaugh said, “I got a request here from a major American print publication. ‘Dear Rush: For the Obama (Immaculate) Inauguration we are asking a handful of very prominent politicians, statesmen, scholars, businessmen, commentators, and economists to write 400 words on their hope for the Obama presidency. We would love to include you....’

"Okay," Limbaugh says, "I'll send you a response, but I don't need 400 words, I need four: *I hope he fails.*"

Now, let's examine this for a moment.

At the time Limbaugh made his statement, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, 598,000 jobs were lost, "the biggest single cut since the end of 1974" pushing the unemployment rate to 7.6 percent. "Factories slashed 207,000 jobs... the largest one-month drop since October 1982. Construction companies cut 111,000 jobs and professional and business services axed 121,000 positions. Retailers eliminated 45,000 jobs while leisure and hospitality cut 28,000 slots."⁵ The country is in the midst of two wars, and the Dow ended the month at 8,000,⁶ (down from a high of more than 14,000).

With those figures glaring at millions of Americans, the man with the biggest microphone in the country *wants* the President of the United States to fail.

"Why do we have to accept the premise," Limbaugh snaps, "that because of the historical nature of his presidency that we want him to succeed? This is affirmative action, if we do that. We want to promote failure, we want to promote incompetence, we want to stand by and not object to what he's doing simply because of the color of his skin? Sorry. I got past the historical nature of this months ago... I'm happy to be the last man standing. I'm honored to be the last man standing."⁷

Here's what conservative Republican and speech writer for President George W. Bush, David Frum, wrote in an editorial about Limbaugh's remarks.

"Notice that Limbaugh did not say: 'I hope the administration's liberal plans fail.' Or (better): 'I know the administration's liberal plans will fail.' Or (best): 'I fear that this administration's liberal plans will fail, as liberal plans usually do.' If it had been phrased that way, nobody could have used Limbaugh's words to misrepresent conservatives as clueless, indifferent or gleeful in the face of the most painful economic crisis in a generation. But then, if it had been phrased that way, nobody would have quoted his words at all—and as Limbaugh himself said, being 'headlined' was the point of the exercise. If it had been phrased that way, Limbaugh's face would not now be adorning the covers of magazines. He phrased his hope in a way that drew maximum attention to himself, offered maximum benefit to the administration and did maximum harm to the party he claims to support."⁸

Memo to El Rushbo: Most Americans don't want ANY U.S. president to fail because if *he* fails, we fail and millions suffer.

That simple logic clearly escapes a man who places his own agenda before the welfare of citizens, many of whom not only listen to him daily but are currently suffering.

However, Limbaugh doesn't reserve his pontifications solely for the political opposition. Here are just a few of his *Golden Oldies*.

On Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb, during a broadcast of ESPN's *NFL Countdown*: "I think what we've had here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well. They're interested in black coaches and black quarterbacks doing well. I think there's a little hope invested in McNabb and he got a lot of credit for the performance of his team that he really didn't deserve." ⁹

On women who protest against sexual harassment: "They're out there protesting what they actually wish would happen to them sometimes." ¹⁰

On actor Michael J. Fox, diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, of "exaggerating the effects of the disease" during a campaign commercial the actor filmed endorsing Missouri Democratic Senate candidate Claire McCaskill: "...moving all around and shaking," Limbaugh mimics for an in-studio camera, "it's purely an act... Either he didn't take his medication or he's acting, one of the two." ¹¹

Regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in 1993 Limbaugh said, "If you are unskilled and uneducated, your job is going south. Skilled workers, educated people are going to do fine 'cause those are the kinds of jobs NAFTA is going to create. If we are going to start rewarding no skills and stupid people, I'm serious, let the unskilled jobs that take absolutely no knowledge whatsoever to do – let stupid and unskilled Mexicans do that work." ¹²

Then there's Rush Limbaugh's *Undeniable Truth Number 24* (of 35) from an article he wrote for the now defunct Sacramento Union in 1988 and has since repeated on his radio show: "Feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women access to the mainstream of society;" ¹³ or my personal favorite, *Number 7*: "There is only one way to get rid of nuclear weapons – use them." ¹⁴

Back to Obama: in July 2010 Limbaugh described President Obama's economic policies as "*purposeful* disaster... There's no question that payback is what this administration is all about, presiding over the decline of the United States of America, and doing so happily." ¹⁵

Or Limbaugh's more personal attack against the president on his July 6, 2010 show. Limbaugh plays a clip from ABC's *This Week* where reporter Cynthia Tucker criticizes Michael Steele as a "...self-aggrandizing gaffe-prone incompetent who would have been fired a long time ago were he not black. Of course the irony is that he never would have been voted in as chairman of the Republican Party were he not black." ¹⁶

Shameful remark by Tucker. However, in a nanosecond, Limbaugh does her one better. "That's exactly the same thing you could say about Obama. He wouldn't have been voted president if he weren't black." ¹⁷

This is what Rush Limbaugh calls "Excellence in Broadcasting." ¹⁸

This is what I call reckless, retaliatory, and dangerous.

"...the problem," Time magazine wrote in a 1995 cover story on Limbaugh, "is that the emerging cyber-democracy amounts to a kind of 'hyper-democracy'... a wired world of ultra-narrowcasting and online discourse, [which] may render democracy more hyper and in some ways less functional.

"The Founders explicitly took lawmaking power out of the people's hands," Time writes, "opting for a representative democracy and not a direct democracy. What concerned them, especially James Madison, was the specter of popular 'passions' unleashed. Their ideal was cool deliberation by elected representatives, buffered from the often shifting winds of opinion... Madison insisted in *The Federalist Papers* on the need to 'refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.'" ¹⁹

Cool deliberation, wisdom, true interest of the country? Those are hardly words used in describing America's self-anointed "Truth Detector" who fluently speaks with "authority" on any *issue-du-jour*. I'm certainly glad he's not *my* elected representative.

Limbaugh's lack of even simple information is staggering.

On his now defunct TV show Limbaugh declared, "The Supreme Court has become the refuge of liberalism in our country, because liberalism has not found its way into our society legislatively." ²⁰

According to easily verifiable facts brought out by Steven Rendell, Jim Naureckas, and Jeff Cohen in their 1995 book, *The Way Things Aren't – Rush Limbaugh's Reign of Error*, "At the time [Limbaugh's] statement was made, eight of the nine Supreme Court justices had been appointed by Republican presidents, four by Reagan. Republican appointees had held a majority on the Supreme Court for the previous 22 years." ²¹ The current court continues to reflect a conservative majority with five positions held by Republican appointees including Chief Justice. The "refuge of liberalism" on the highest court in the land would seem to exist only in *El Rushbo's* head.

In a by-gone era, Rush Limbaugh's brand of commentary would be called "Cracker Barrel" talk when someone would pull up a rocking chair at the local country store, sit and listen to Uncle Fred, the de facto authority, crack wise about all manner of people and issues. The critical difference here is that Uncle Fred's opinions rarely made it past the front porch, and his influence over those who *did* believe him was limited to whoever sat in the room on any given day. Limbaugh's "country store" seats about 20 million, and far too many believe that, when it comes to federal or state policy and people, "*Maha Rushie*" ²² sees all, knows all.

The sheer power of Rush Limbaugh cannot be minimized. When he refers to himself as "the fourth branch of government," it's no joke. As Rendell, Naureckas, and Cohen point out, "The power of this one man to mobilize activists may outstrip that of the National Rifle Association or the American Association of Retired People. For while these groups have millions of members, what they lack is the broadcast powers to reach their constituents each and every weekday." ²³

However, with this power comes responsibility and to date, Limbaugh shows no signs of refraining from playing fast and loose with his language as well as the facts. According to a publisher's statement posted on Amazon.com about Limbaugh's 1992 book, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, "the provocative conservative... is 'documented to be almost always right 97.9% of the time.'"

Now that's a statement I'd like to fact-check.

PolitiFact is an organization formed by The St. Petersburg Times, whose stated purpose is "to help you find the truth in politics... [by examining] statements [made] by members of Congress, the president, cabinet

secretaries, lobbyists, people who testify before Congress and anyone else who speaks up in Washington. We research their statements and then rate the accuracy on our Truth-O-Meter – True, Mostly True, Half True, Barely True and False. The most ridiculous falsehoods get our lowest rating, Pants on Fire.”

Of twelve Limbaugh statements checked (as of March 4, 2011) by the 2009 Pulitzer Prize winning organization, 1 was rated “Mostly True,” 2 were “Half True,” 3 were “Barely True,” 3 “False,” and 3 were designated “Pants-on-Fire” false.

Few issues raise Limbaugh’s hackles more than “ObamaCare.” On August 6, 2009, a caller to Limbaugh’s program said, “Listen, of all the scary things in this health care bill, Rush, the scariest thing is this: The government, if this passes, will be able to go into your bank account or anybody’s bank account... [and] take the money out to fund this monstrosity. Did you know that?”

“He’s right, folks,” Limbaugh said. “That is in the House bill.”

Here’s what PolitiFact found. “The provision in question is in Section 163 of the House bill (page 59), under the heading ‘Administrative Simplification.’ It broadly sets out goals for standardizing electronic health records. The legislative summary says the intent in the section is ‘to adopt standards for typical transactions’ between insurance companies and health care providers.

“On the White House Web site,” PolitiFact writes, “Nancy-Ann DeParle, director of the *White House Office of Health Reform*, spoke to the issue, saying, ‘Individuals, not the government, will be in charge of their bank accounts, just like they are today.’

“[PolitiFact] read Section 163 and found nothing that would *require* patients to participate in electronic payments.

“While it sounds ominous to say the government could get into your bank account, the same is true for utility and mortgage companies for whom customers have given permission to extract regular electronic payments directly from their bank accounts. The way Limbaugh says it, it sounds like the government would require this program (that it would ‘have the right’) to get into your account, that the government could do it without your permission. And we find no basis for that claim in the bill. We also think Limbaugh exaggerates when he says the government could then transfer money in your account without you knowing it. If you sign up for electronic

withdrawal, you know about it. And so we rate this claim Barely True.”²⁴

And Limbaugh’s *one and only* “Mostly True” statement – that Senator Arlen Specter’s party switch could “end up giving Republicans the ability to filibuster judicial nominees at the Judiciary Committee level so that the nominees never get out of committee” – PolitiFact concludes that “Limbaugh is right about the existence of the committee rule and its potential effects. He admits it’s a long shot. But it’s not a filibuster in committee in the way that the rule works. And unlike the classic filibuster, the Rule IV move could likely be overcome by the full Senate. But at its core, Limbaugh is right; it’s a possible maneuver for the Republican minority. We rule Limbaugh’s statement Mostly True.”²⁵

For someone who claims to be “almost always right 97.9 percent” of the time, Limbaugh manages to squeeze a lot into the 2.1 percent he gets wrong.

The critical conceit behind Limbaughism is to always keep stirring the pot, inflaming emotions, getting Americans riled up, fulminating, whatever it takes. And guess what? Americans *should* be engaged in their government. They *should* challenge and, when necessary, speak out concerning any and all actions by their elected leaders that they don’t support. *But...* they should do so armed with the facts, not some bucket of rumor, innuendo, distortion, or lies.

Circling back to my dinner party guest and the Gulf oil spill, these were Limbaugh’s comments from his May 3, 2010, show: “The Ocean will take care of this on its own if it was left alone and left out there. It’s natural. It’s as natural as the ocean water is.”

However –

A July 29, 2010, report in Time magazine points out that Limbaugh *may* have been right.

Time’s Michael Grunwald writes, “The Deepwater explosion was an awful tragedy for the 11 workers, who died on the rig, and it’s no leak; it’s the biggest oil spill in U.S. history... But so far – while it’s important to acknowledge that the long-term potential danger is simply unknowable for an underwater event that took place just three months ago – it does not seem to be inflicting severe environmental damage. ‘The impacts have been much, much less than everyone feared,’ says geochemist Jacqueline Michel, a federal contractor who is coordinating shoreline assessments in Louisiana.

"Yes, the spill killed birds – but so far, less than 1% of the birds killed by the Exxon Valdez. Yes, we've heard horror stories about oiled dolphins – but, so far, wildlife response teams have collected only three visibly oiled carcasses of any mammals. Yes, the spill prompted harsh restrictions on fishing and shrimping, but so far, the region's fish and shrimp have tested clean, and the restrictions are gradually being lifted. And, yes, scientists have warned that the oil could accelerate the destruction of Louisiana's disintegrating coastal marshes – a real slow-motion ecological calamity – but, so far, shorelines assessment teams have only found about 350 acres of oiled marshes, when Louisiana was already losing about 15,000 acres of wetlands every year." ²⁶

However, Part II –

Well no, he's actually wrong.

On November 5, 2010, John Collins Rudolf reported, in both the Wall Street Journal and New York Times, "A survey of the seafloor near BP's blown-out well in the Gulf of Mexico has turned up dead and dying coral reefs that were probably damaged by the oil spill, scientists said Friday.

"The coral sites lie seven miles southwest of the well, at a depth of about 4,500 feet, in an area where large plumes of dispersed oil were discovered drifting through the deep ocean last spring in the weeks after the spill.

"The large areas of darkened coral and other damaged marine organisms were almost certainly dying from exposure to toxic substances, scientists said.

"The documented presence of oil plumes in the area, the proximity to BP's well and the recent nature of the die-off makes it highly likely that the spill was responsible, said Charles Fisher, a marine biologist from Pennsylvania State University who is the chief scientist on the gulf expedition, which was financed by the federal government.

"Oil seeps naturally from the seafloor throughout the Gulf of Mexico, but that was unlikely to have caused such a severe coral die-off... 'We have never seen anything like this at any of the deep coral sites that we've been to,' Dr. Fisher said. 'And we've been to quite a lot of them.' " ²⁷

One point that my dinner partner failed to bring up during our conversation was Limbaugh's statement made four days earlier suggesting that "environmentalist whackos" sabotaged BP's oil rig in the Gulf in order to stop offshore drilling. "What better way to head off more oil drilling, nuclear

plants," Limbaugh said, "than by blowing up a rig? I'm just noting the timing, here." ²⁸

Limbaugh's Ethical Report Card –

Trustworthiness: F For someone who bills himself as "America's Truth Detector," there's more hype than truth behind Limbaugh. According to PolitiFact.com and basic resources, he is rarely accurate and far less straightforward. This stands in stark contrast to his statement of being "almost always right 97.9 percent." He deliberately misleads his listeners with suggestions such as "environmentalist whackos" may have sabotaged the BP oil rig in the gulf.

Further, Limbaugh lacks integrity when he neglects to correct his earlier statement which minimized the effects of the BP oil spill in light of later analysis that has proven otherwise. While it would seem that Limbaugh considers himself a loyal American, he frequently demonstrates that his own agenda comes before any objective, independent judgments.

Respect: F Limbaugh's mockery of women, individuals who have been medically diagnosed with a disabling disease as well as his disparaging of Mexicans, and his statement that Obama "...wouldn't have been voted president if he weren't black," clearly demonstrate a lack of courtesy and decency.

Responsibility: F His reckless statements range from the perverse – as when he remarked about wanting the president to fail and claiming that Obama's economic policies are "purposeful disaster" – to the demented in declaring that "There is only one way to get rid of nuclear weapons, use them." Statements like these not only fly in the face of self-discipline but clearly expose Limbaugh's win-at-any-cost attitude.

Sharing opinions like these at a public gathering would be careless. Speaking to millions through the media five days a week is gross negligence considering the potential to influence those millions who *believe* him and vote on issues that affect us all.

Citizenship: F I considered adding a "+" inasmuch as *Limbaugh* believes that he's acting in the best interest of the country by pointing out waste, fraud and abuse. In fact, his relentless use of misinformation and self-serving assertions, as conservative David Frum points out, actually do a disservice to the party he claims to support. Limbaugh's self-interest clearly and consistently comes before any national interest.

While I wonder what journalist Murrow would say to all this, I think I could make a case for what Counsel for the Army Joseph Welch at Senator McCarthy's Senate subcommittee hearing might say to Limbaugh, "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

She's like Lady Macbeth, without the sincerity.

– Joe Keenan

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful princess named Ann who had long, golden hair. She went to school, a good one, got a law degree, and eventually went to work in a very important city where she got involved in politics. She used her incredible talent to write a very successful book about a very controversial U.S. president and *bingo*, she got a lot of attention as a witty, whip-smart (and windblown) conservative pundit.

Somewhere along the line, however, little Ann turned from political analyst to partisan roughneck skilled in a take-no-prisoners approach without mussing any of that long, golden hair.

I used to like Ann Coulter back in the day when she'd appear on *Politically Incorrect*, an earlier incarnation of comedian Bill Maher's cable show. She was smart, sharp, and incredibly fluent on a variety of political and social issues. In her 1998 book, *High Crimes and Misdemeanors: the Case against Bill Clinton*, Coulter focused like a laser on the audaciousness that was Bill Clinton. Although her hyperbole was, at times, excessive, much of her argument made sense. And her examination of the impeachment process was a valuable lesson to anyone about the potential abuses of power both personal and political.

Of the three individuals examined here, Coulter is far and away the smartest. In HBO boxing parlance, Ann Coulter is the Manny Pacquiao to any number of conservative contenders. Coulter is the only one of the three to whom the term "pundit" used to apply.

Notice, I say *used to*.

Armed with eight weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and the release of her second book, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (2002), Coulter came down with a terrible case of *Coughlin's Disease* – that formidable and sooner-or-later fatal malady where a pundit begins to believe his or her own press-clippings and engages in saying and writing anything outrageous, because for Coulter it's not about the message, it's *all* about the messenger.

This was Coulter's game plan from the time she attended Cornell University. According to the smarmy 2004 documentary, *Is It True What They Say About Ann?*, while seated in the backseat of an SUV with a camera pointed in her face, Coulter admits, "It was when I started editing the *Cornell Review* my senior year of college that I suddenly decided I wanted to be a writer

because it was really fun getting liberals to go crazy. It's kind of addictive," she laughs.

Coulter has since honed her mantra. "I'd be disappointed if liberals did not spit their drinks out when they heard my name," she said in a recent New York Times interview. "That's kind of what I'm shooting for. But that does not relate to the reality of me. It relates to me creating a reaction in godless traitors."¹

Ouch!

Coulter's first epiphany came in response to an article she wrote for the university's paper. When she began receiving hate mail, she realized... she *liked it!* It was at that moment – her biographer will later record – when Ann Hart Coulter swept herself off her feet and fell head-over-heels in love with herself!

"I just think it's a waste of great talent,"² Bob Guccione Jr., founder of Spin magazine told New York Times writer Laura Holson, and he should know; he dated Coulter in the late 90s. "She could have argued cases before the Supreme Court," Guccione says. "Instead," as Holson writes, "she was consumed by politics... using her column and television appearances to further her conservative agenda."

"I think," Guccione concludes, "she was aware she had a *shtick* and she knew it was good."

In an effort at reinventing (*regaining* the spotlight that has since moved on to The Tea Party), Coulter has been making the tea and crumpet circuit of Republican Women's Clubs. "As the leader of 12 Apostles," she proclaims to her fans, "even Jesus had more experience than Obama!"³

The crowd roars.

Ann's *shtick* in books and interviews is that liberals in general and the liberal media, specifically, focus less on rational debate and more on name-calling and outrageous claims, such as labeling President Ronald Reagan "an airhead." In what has become archetypal, unapologetic incongruity, Coulter uses name-calling and invective against liberals in her books and speeches and ends up defending herself against the words and strategy she herself decries.

In an interview with Katie Couric in January 2008, Coulter spends the first part of the interview reiterating her familiar liberal premise, then spends the

majority of the time defending comments she's made like this where she talks about fighting terrorism: "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity."

Couric asks, "Do you still believe that that's the best way to combat terrorism worldwide?"

"Well," Coulter shoots back, "point one and point two, by the end of the week, had become official government policy. As for converting them to Christianity, I think it might be a good idea to get them on some sort of hobby other than slaughtering infidels. I mean, perhaps that's the Peace Corps, perhaps it's working for Planned Parenthood, but I've never seen the transforming effect of anything like Christianity." ⁴

In chapter two of *Guilty, Liberal 'Victims' and Their Assault on America* (2009) entitled, "Victim of a Crime? Thank a single mother," Coulter spends a whopping thirty-eight pages decrying the state of single motherhood.

" 'Single mothers' are women who, by their own volition, have done everything in their power to ruin their children's lives before they're even born. It makes no difference if the pregnancy was unplanned, unwanted or accidental. And many aren't any of those. Getting pregnant isn't like catching the flu. There are volitional acts involved – someone else explain it to Dennis Kucinich... Look at almost any societal problem and you will find it is really a problem of single mothers."

Cut to:

Page 137 – "Palin's eighteen-year-old daughter was cheerfully depicted as a trollop for being pregnant and unmarried – naturally, on the grounds that Republicans would say that about a Democrat in the same circumstance."

Does Ann wonder why she gets attacked for statements like this?

No.

Why? Because the more outrageous the remark, the more attention she gets!

Ann Coulter is the *Lady Gaga* of political punditry whose absurdity doesn't come from raw-meat, Origami-like costumes, but out of her own mouth and self-congratulatory blog site. Anncoulter.com showcases no less than 48 individual photos of Narcissus' younger sister: Ann with Sean Hannity, Ann at the podium, Ann in full Hollywood-sunglass mode, with Reverend Al, in

black leather, on the ski slopes, and in one incredibly creepy photo, Coulter is seen leaning over the massive headstone of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.

"The myth of 'McCarthyism,' " Coulter writes in *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (2003), "is the greatest Orwellian fraud of our times... Liberals are fanatical liars, then as now. Everything you think you know about McCarthy is a hegemonic lie." (Isn't Ann a wonderful vocabulary builder, though?)

In his book, *America: The Last Best Hope* (2006), conservative and former Reagan Secretary of Education William Bennett wrote of McCarthy, "The cause of anti-communism, which united millions of Americans and which gained the support of Democrats, Republicans and independents, was undermined by Sen. Joe McCarthy... McCarthy addressed a real problem: disloyal elements within the U.S. government. But his approach to this real problem was to cause untold grief to the country he claimed to love... Worst of all, McCarthy besmirched the honorable cause of anti-communism. He discredited legitimate efforts to counter Soviet subversion of American institutions."⁵

In the political board game that has become Coulter's life, her most popular ploy is role-reversal – everything she claims Democrat's are she passionately demonstrates.

"Liberals always have to be the victims," she writes on page one of *Guilty*, "the key to any political argument [is] to pretend to be insulted and register operatic anger. Liberals are the masters of finger-wagging indignation."

Cut to:

Godless (2006), where Coulter attacks four 9/11 widows writing, "These self-obsessed women seemed genuinely unaware that 9/11 was an attack on our nation and acted as if the terrorist attacks happened only to them. ... I've never seen people enjoying their husbands' deaths so much ... how do we know their husbands weren't planning to divorce these harpies?"

When NBC's Matt Lauer challenges Coulter on that statement in a June 2006 interview, Coulter turns indignity, operatic anger, and victimization into high art.

LAUER: (reading) "These broads are millionaires, lionized on TV and in articles about them, reveling in their status as celebrities and stalked by *grief-arazzis*... I've never seen people enjoying their husbands' deaths so

much....”

COULTER: Yes.

LAUER: Because they dare to speak out?

COULTER: To speak out using the fact that they’re widows. This is the left’s doctrine of infallibility. If they have a point to make about the 9/11 Commission about how to fight the war on terrorism, how about sending in somebody who’s allowed to respond to. No, no, no, we always have to respond to someone who’s just had a family member die, because then if you respond, oh you’re questioning their authenticity. No, the story is an attack on the nation. That requires a foreign policy response. That does not entail.

LAUER: And by the way, they also criticized the Clinton administration for their failures leading up to 9/11.

COULTER: Not the ones I’m talking about. Oh, no, no, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no. They were cutting commercials for [John] Kerry. They were using their grief in order to make a political point while preventing anyone from responding

LAUER: So, if you lose a husband you no longer have the right to have a political point of view?

COULTER: No, but don’t use the fact that you lost a husband as a basis for your being able to talk about it while preventing people from responding. Let Matt Lauer make the point. Let Bill Clinton make the point. Don’t put up someone I’m not allowed to respond to without questioning the authenticity of their grief.

LAUER: But apparently you are allowed to respond to them.

COULTER: Well, yeah I did.

LAUER: Right. So, in other words...

COULTER: But that is the point of liberal infallibility, of putting up Cindy Sheehan, of putting out these widows, of putting out Joe Wilson. No, no, no, you can’t respond. It’s their doctrine of infallibility. Let someone else make the argument, then.

LAUER: What I'm saying is I don't think they've ever told you, you can't respond. So, why can't they...

COULTER: Look, you're getting *testy* with me! ⁶

Of course, the critical point that Coulter adroitly dodges is her utter recklessness in second guessing what's in the minds of the widows much less speculate on what their husbands were planning to do.

In June 2007, Elizabeth Edwards confronted Ann on MSNBC's Chris Matthews show about her personal attacks against her husband, then Presidential candidate John Edwards. Note how Ann ratchets up her "operatic anger" without ever addressing the point.

EDWARDS: ...when someone does something that displeases us we want to ask them politely to stop doing it. I'd like to ask Ann Coulter -- if she wants to debate on issues, on positions -- we certainly disagree with nearly everything she said on your show today -- but it's quite another matter for these personal attacks that the things she has said over the years not just about John but about other candidates -- it lowers our political dialogue precisely at the time that we need to raise it. So I want to use the opportunity to ask her politely stop the personal attacks.

COULTER: OK, so I made a joke -- let's see six months ago -- and as you point out they've been raising money off of it for six months since then.

MATTHEWS: This is yesterday morning, what you said about him.

COULTER: I didn't say anything about him actually either time.

EDWARDS: Ann, you know that's not true. And what's more it's been going on for some time.

COULTER: I don't mind you trying to raise money. I mean it's better this than giving \$50,000 speeches to the poor.

EDWARDS: I'm asking you...

COULTER: Just to use my name on the Web pages...

EDWARDS: I'm asking you politely...

COULTER: ... but as for a debate with me, yeah, sure. Yeah, we'll have a debate.

EDWARDS: I'm asking you politely to stop personal attacks.

COULTER: How bout you stop raising money on the Web page then?

EDWARDS: It did not start with that. You had a column a number of years ago.

COULTER: OK, great the wife of a presidential candidate is calling in asking me to stop speaking.

MATTHEWS: Let her finish the point.

COULTER: You're asking me to stop speaking, stop writing your columns, stop writing your books.

MATTHEWS: OK, Ann. Please.

COULTER: OK.

EDWARDS: You wrote a column a couple years ago which made fun of the moment of Charlie Dean's death, [brother of Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean who was killed in Viet Nam] and suggested that my husband had a bumper sticker on the back of his car that said, 'Ask me about my dead son.' This is not legitimate political dialogue.

COULTER: That's now three years ago.

EDWARDS: It debases political dialogue. It drives people away from the process. We can't have a debate about issues if you're using this kind of language.

COULTER: Yeah, why isn't John Edwards making this call?

MATTHEWS: Well, do you want to respond and we'll end this conversation?

EDWARDS: I haven't talked to John about this call.

COULTER: This is just another attempt for...

EDWARDS: I'm making this call as a mother. I'm the mother of that boy who died. My children participate -- these young people behind you are the age

of my children. You're asking them to participate in a dialogue that's based on hatefulness and ugliness instead of on the issues and I don't think that's serving them or this country very well.”⁷

In interview after interview, Coulter plays the valiant victim in defense of her own remarks so often I’m surprised that as a practicing Christian she hasn’t petitioned the church for sainthood. Of course the indispensable tactic in the Coulter Catechism is, first and foremost, the ad hominem assault.

“I was going to have a few comments about John Edwards but you have to go into rehab if you use the word faggot.”⁸

“I think our motto should be, post-9/11, ‘raghead talks tough, raghead faces consequences.’ ”⁹

“The swing voters – I like to refer to them as the idiot voters because they don’t have set philosophical principles. You’re either a liberal or you’re a conservative if you have an IQ above a toaster.”¹⁰

“Press passes can’t be that hard to come by if the White House allows that old Arab Helen Thomas to sit within yards of the President.”¹¹

In her 2002 book *Slander – Liberal Lies About the American Right*, she writes “...liberals prefer invective to engagement. The hate-mongering and name-calling on the left might be a droll irrelevancy, except that it has a debilitating effect on real issues.”

She then proceeds to call Christie Todd Whitman a “birdbrain” and a “dimwit.” Senator Jim Jeffords is a “half-wit.” The New Yorker’s Jeffrey Toobin is a “political hack duly celebrated for making things up, engaging in unethical behavior, and slinging other liberal journalists for a want of alacrity in bending over for Bill Clinton.”

In one quote, the anti-hate-mongering Coulter uses the word “hate” no less than 5 times in describing liberals: “Liberals hate [1] America. They hate [2] ‘flag-wavers,’ they hate [3] abortion opponents, they hate [4] all religions except Islam (post 9/11). Even Islamic terrorists don’t hate [5] America like liberals do. If they had that much energy, they’d have indoor plumbing by now.”

Of course, Ann defends all this as “colorful commentary.”¹²

From Lady Coulter’s perspective contradictions like this don’t seem to matter. With her popularity in book sales, media exposure as well as the

lecture circuit, Coulter turned from conservative watchdog to pit bull faster than you can say *Kal Kan*.

In a Fox News interview Coulter *defends* the murder of abortion doctor George Tiller. "I don't really like to think of it as murder. It was terminating Tiller in the 203rd trimester." ¹³

In March, 2010, Ann Coulter came face-to-face with a Muslim student who took exception to a remark by the "colorful" conservative who said that Muslims shouldn't be allowed on airplanes, but rather "take flying carpets."

University of Ottawa student Fatima Al-Dhaher flatly told Coulter that she didn't own a flying carpet. What mode of transportation would she then suggest?

"What mode of transportation?" Coulter repeated, straight-faced. "Take a camel."

Coulter later tried to explain away the remark as "satire." ¹⁴ What she did *not* defend as satire was a series of statements she made to CNBC host Donny Deutsch on *The Big Idea*.

COULTER: Well, OK, take the Republican National Convention. People were happy. They're Christian. They're tolerant. They defend America, they...

DEUTSCH: Christian -- so we should be Christian? It would be better if we were all Christian?

COULTER: Yes.

DEUTSCH: We should all be Christian?

COULTER: Yes. Would you like to come to church with me, Donny?

DEUTSCH: So I should not be a Jew, I should be a Christian, and this would be a better place?

COULTER: Well, you could be a practicing Jew but you're not.

DEUTSCH: I actually am. That's not true. I really am. But -- so we would be better if we were - if people -- if there were no Jews, no Buddhists... we should just throw Judaism away and we should all be Christians, then, or --

COULTER: Yeah.¹⁵

For Coulter, outrage is the gift that keeps on giving, getting the media attention she so desperately craves. Who else is as raucous, raunchy, and vainglorious?

Wait, that would be the Queen of the D-List herself, comedian Kathy Griffin. Think about it, Coulter fits the mold to perfection: Anything outrageous equals media attention. Except for one, *tiny* detail: when Griffin offers up an outrage the audience generally laughs because she's a comedian. When Coulter makes an outrageous remark, she defends it as rational policy.

Coulter's Ethical Report Card –

Trustworthiness: D- Many of Coulter's statements could be said to fall under the category of bluster (liberals as "godless traitors," and "even Jesus had more experience than Obama"), calculated solely for self-aggrandizement. In another attempt to top herself, Coulter recently expanded her expertise to include nuclear radiation in commenting on fears of radiation poisoning by blithely stating to Bill O'Reilly (Mar. 18, 2011) that "There is a growing body of evidence that radiation in excess of what the government says are the minimum amounts we should be exposed to are actually good for you and reduce cases of cancer." Statements like this clearly lack any "good faith intent to be truthful and accurate" in her communication, as ethicist Josephson defines it.

Respect: F Coulter consistently violates practical norms of courtesy, civility, and tolerance when she characterizes 9/11 widows as "harpies," and tells middle easterners that they should travel by "camel," or "flying carpet." The ad hominem attack remains her derision of choice. (As a self-proclaimed, practicing Christian, Ann must spend a great deal of time in the confessional.)

Responsibility: F Self-restraint and self-discipline are not concepts embraced by Coulter, and her utter lack of accountability is breathtaking. She consistently (and with profligate zeal) defends her hate speech. When Elizabeth Edwards politely petitions "to stop personal attacks" no less than *four* times, Coulter ignores her request, then impugns Edwards' integrity by accusing her of using Coulter's name to fundraise.

Citizenship: F In both words and tone, Coulter consistently places her own interests before any coherent debate. Time and again, in television interviews, Coulter is given an opportunity to speak to millions about political and social issues in a clear and compelling way, but ends up

spending a great deal of the time defending her own outrageous remarks.

"Political 'debate' in this country is insufferable," Coulter writes in *Slander*.

And she's right!

However, rather than attempt to put a more respectful and cogent face on that debate, Ann Coulter resorts to a plethora of the very invective and hate-mongering she decries.

Sure, Kathy Griffin is on the *D-List* and proud to admit it. "The beauty about the *D-List*," Griffin says, "is that people who are on it probably don't know they are."¹⁶

When it comes to rational, political debate, Coulter is and doesn't.

If you take what I say as gospel, you're an idiot.

— Glenn Beck, *New York Times*, March 29, 2009

I remember sitting back on a flight to Jacksonville, Florida to read *Glenn Beck's Common Sense, Inspired* (the cover reads), *by Thomas Paine*." (By the way, Paine never used his name in the title. The American patriot referenced himself simply as "Written by an Englishman.")

In a 2009 Harris poll among 2,276 adults surveyed online, when asked, "Who is your favorite TV personality?" Fox News' Glenn Beck beat out everyone except Oprah Winfrey. That's right, Beck beat out Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Ellen DeGeneres, Hugh Laurie (that weird guy from *House*), Charlie Sheen (that much weirder and wilder guy *formerly* from *Two and a Half Men*), David Letterman, and Bill O'Reilly.

Back up a minute.

The pollsters didn't ask, "Who is your favorite *political pundit, commentator, or news analyst*?" They asked, "Who is your favorite TV *personality*?"

The latest incarnation of the "radio priest" is on the air five days a week beginning in a radio studio in New York City, before he jumps to a TV studio at Fox News in which he usually stands before a chalkboard and at times, three outsized images of Sam Adams, Ben Franklin, and George Washington, each with the words "Faith," "Hope," and "Charity" emblazoned below their respective images.

According to an April 2010 Forbes profile, Beck, Inc. has 34 full-time staffers to help Professor/Pastor Beck (on a given day, one never knows if you're getting the teacher or the preacher) prepare to talk to "just under 3 million viewers." According to Beck's right hand, Chris Balfe, "We have 400 radio stations... sold 3 million books last year... [and] have 5 million [monthly unique visitors] on Glennbeck.com...."

"With a weekly average of 9 million listeners," Forbes writes, "Beck's is the third-highest-ranked radio talk show in America, behind Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity."

Glenn Beck's man-of-the-people approach is encapsulated in the title of his 2003 book, *The Real America – Early Writings from the Heart and the Heartland*. (How many farmers wish they could pull down \$33 million a year in revenue as Beck does? ¹).

Meanwhile, back on the plane.

"If you believe that it's time to put principles above parties," Beck writes, "character above campaign promises, and Common Sense above all – then I ask you to read this book, declare yourself a creative extremist, and then pass these words along to others who may agree with something Martin Luther King, Jr., once said: 'The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.' "

Okay, Glenn, you've got my attention.

I sat up straight when I read parts like, "Do you trust those in power to always tell you the hard truth – especially if it would hurt them at election time?" ²

"There are no shortcuts in achieving and living the American Dream. It takes hard work, relentless dedication to your core principles and values, and, above all, patience. Nothing comes easy; nothing happens fast. But that kind of sense is just not so common anymore." ³

"You never waste your vote if you vote your conscience.... Common sense tells us that supporting the individual of our choice, after having studied his position on the issues, is never a waste." ⁴

I began moving uncomfortably in my seat by the end of page 60.

"The enemies are at the gate, and have been for quite some time. Many 'liberals' have begun to call themselves 'progressives' instead because it sounds new and forward thinking – but the truth is that it's anything but. It is a movement that requires Americans to sever the ties to our founding and follow an ever evolving social gospel instead." ⁵

Progressives, new?

According to a heavily annotated entry in Wikipedia, "The Progressive Era in the United States was a period of reform that flourished from the 1890's to the 1920s. Purification of the system to remove corruption was a main goal of the Progressive Era, with Progressives trying to expose and undercut political machines and bosses." ⁶

Among the most notable Progressives: Teddy Roosevelt (the one on Mount Rushmore, Glenn), Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes, and Herbert Hoover – all Republicans; as well as Democrats William

Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, and Al Smith.

On June 10, 2009, Beck declares, "I'm going to be a progressive hunter like the old Nazi hunters. I don't care where they are... Progressivism will kill you!"

Beck goes on like this for much of the balance of the 111 pages before he offers readers a copy of Paine's original *Common Sense* – the real breath of fresh air.

However, page 109 got my attention when Beck puts forth his *9.12 Project* – a list of 9 principles and 12 values. I made a notation at the top of the page, *Coughlin?*

Later, I looked up and confirmed that the "radio priest" had put forth his *own* principles under his latest endeavor, The National Union of Social Justice. "Establishing my principles upon this preamble," Coughlin writes in 1934, "namely, that we are all creatures of a beneficent God, made to love and serve Him in this world...." ⁷

"America is good," Beck writes in *his* principles; and "I believe in God and He is the Center of my Life." ⁸ Although Beck has never advocated a socialist agenda, his zealotry and language is strikingly similar to Coughlin's.

"This is a day that we can start the heart of America again," Beck declares at his *Restoring Honor* rally in Washington, DC in August 2010. "It has nothing to do with politics. It has everything to do with God... turning our faces back to the values and the principles that made us great." ⁹

Before I go any further, let me say that I have no problem with anyone's *belief* in God. I do, however, have a problem with people who *use* God for social or political persuasion particularly in formidable times.

The Real America

For those who have *not* read Glenn Beck's *The Real America*, allow me to summarize using Beck's own style sheet from Chapter Four:

The Real America is about... the American spirit, the Founding Fathers blah blah Hollywood doesn't get it... blah blah! Fairness blah blah... Decency... blah blah... Entertainment... Enlightenment... blah blah... heartfelt conviction blah blah... *Real* Ethics, *Real* Values, Real *ME* blah blah, listen to me, Me, and ME!

If *Real America* were a sequence from a Hollywood biopic of Beck, it would be like that scene from *The Parallax View* where the Warren Beatty character sits in front of a movie screen that projects a barrage of contrasting images of America at war with itself. At first, it all seems comforting, nostalgic, then the imagery takes a hard right into a twilight zone of anger, hate, and despair where the viewer is confused, frustrated, and finally angry. The viewer wants to kill something, somebody, but wait... here comes our hero. Is it Lady Liberty? No, it's the Right-Reverend-Professor Beck, sword held high, leading us over the cliffs of inanity.

For someone so critical of Hollywood's crass, in-your-face commercialism, *Brand Beck* has no problem promoting himself... *a lot*. Let's start with *Glenn Beck Live!* "You may have seen some great live performances in your time," his Web site proclaims, "but there's never been a guy quite like Glenn Beck. But if you haven't seen him on stage, you ain't seen a thing." (This may come as shocking news to fans of the *Stones* and *Wynonna*.)

Beck's Web site proudly proclaims the man's mission statement at the top in gold letters: "The Fusion of Entertainment and Enlightenment." In between links to Beck's *Radio, TV, Tours, Books, Blog, My Account, and Help*, are commercial endorsements by his eminence: "Do you Have Food Insurance... *Goldline... Carbonite... LifeLock?*"

I click on the *Store* and immediately pull up "Faith," "Hope," and "Charity" Founding Father T-shirts, ties, mugs, posters, audio, video, polo shirts, sweatshirts, and subscription info to Beck's own magazine, *Fusion*.

Father Coughlin only *wishes* he had this kind of national marketing presence.

Top Forty

Glenn Beck is the same man who, on July 28, 2009, uttered the infamous words, "This president, I think, has exposed himself as a guy – over and over and over again – who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture. This guy, I believe, is a racist."

On October 1, 2010, CNN fired Rick Sanchez *one day* after the Cuban-American anchor told a national radio audience that Comedy Central's Jon Stewart was a "bigot." "I'm telling you" Sanchez told interviewer Pete Dominick, "that everybody who runs CNN is a lot like Stewart, and a lot of people who run all the other networks are a lot like Stewart...." ¹⁰

In a statement, CNN said, "Rick Sanchez is no longer with the company. We thank Rick for his years of service and we wish him well." ¹¹

National Public Radio fired news analyst Juan Williams two days after Williams made controversial remarks to Bill O'Reilly on Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor* that NPR deemed "inconsistent with our editorial standards and practices, and undermined his credibility as a news analyst on NPR." ¹²

After Beck appeared on the morning show *Fox and Friends* and called the president of the United States a racist, Fox released a statement saying that "Glenn Beck expressed a personal opinion which represented his own views, not those of the Fox News Channel," Bill Shine, senior vice president of programming for Fox News, said in a statement. "And as with all commentators in the cable news arena, he is given the freedom to express his opinions." ¹³

That's it.

Had I been the head of Fox, I would have immediately yanked Beck from the airwaves, allowing him to come back *only* if he offered specific, verifiable proof of his accusation or was willing to make a sincere, public apology to President Obama and the American people, and give assurances that he would not engage in such talk in the future.

Flash forward: August 30, 2010.

Glenn Beck *apologizes*... more than *one year* later. "I have a big, fat mouth sometimes," Beck told Chris Wallace. "That's just not the way people should behave." ¹⁴

This is just one of dozens of inane and contemptible statements that Glenn Beck is allowed to make in service to his own (conservative, Christian, Mormon, God-speaks-through-me) agenda. In honor of the former Top Forty DJ, here are some of the more "beloved" utterances from the eminence of enlightenment:

"When I see a 9/11 victim family on television, or whatever, I'm just like, 'Oh shut up' I'm so sick of them because they're always complaining." (*Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck Program, September 9, 2005*)

"I say we nuke the bastards. In fact, it doesn't have to be Iran; it can be everywhere, anyplace that disagrees with me." (*Beck, when asked for his views about bombing Iran, Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck*

Program, May 11, 2006)

"So here you have Barack Obama going in and spending the money on embryonic stem cell research. ... Eugenics. In case you don't know what Eugenics led us to: the Final Solution. A master race! A perfect person. ...The stuff that we are facing is absolutely frightening." (*Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck Program, March 9, 2009*)

"There are a lot of universities that are as dangerous with the indoctrination of the children as terrorists are in Iran or North Korea. ... We have been setting up reeducation camps. We call them universities." (*Fox News, Glenn Beck, September 1, 2010*)

"The plan that He would have me articulate, I think, to you, is get behind Me, and I don't mean 'me,' I mean Him. Get behind Me. Stand behind Me." (*Beck, speaking on behalf of God, Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck Program, April 20, 2010*)

"I haven't seen Jesus and what he would do on a talk show on Fox, but I'm going to try." (*Fox News, Glenn Beck, April 21, 2010*)

We now pause, briefly for an Archduke Ferdinand Moment

Beck is fond of predicting our next global catastrophe. In recent years, he has been given to referencing them thusly: "I fear another *Archduke Ferdinand Moment*." ¹⁵

"I think there is a chance that Tunisia is our *Archduke Ferdinand Moment* that I've been telling you about, warning that it would start in some place that wouldn't look like anything and most of us wouldn't understand it.

"[Archduke Ferdinand] was the guy assassinated in Sarajevo, June 1914. A month later, Austria and Hungary declared war against Serbia and the rest is called World War I....

"This is not just happenstance," Beck tells his audience of uprisings throughout the Middle East. "This is coordinated." (*Fox News, Glenn Beck, January 31, 2011*)

Wait... didn't we just have an AFM last year with the BP oil spill?

"I told you we could be heading towards an *Archduke Ferdinand Moment*. Could this oil spill be part of that moment? Could it be that even the revolutionaries are waiting for this particular moment?" (*Fox News, Glenn*

Beck, June 17, 2010)

Maybe it's a different moment.

"I want to talk to you about what happened over with the flotilla just off the coast of Israel.... And I've told you for awhile, we are looking for [an] *Archduke Ferdinand Moment*. That's what the world is headed towards." (*Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck Program, June 1, 2010*)

"North Korea is the *Archduke Ferdinand Moment*...." (*Premiere Radio Networks, The Glenn Beck Program, May 25, 2010*)

"...looking for that *Archduke Ferdinand Moment*.... I think the final straw that could break our camel's back could be the collapse of Mexico." (*Fox News, Glenn Beck, February 3, 2009*)

"I fear an *Archduke Ferdinand Moment* that we're close to one with Iran..." (*CNN Headline News, Glenn Beck, January 30, 2007*)

We now return to our regularly scheduled text.

The Plan

On November 26, 2009, Glenn Beck told a large crowd of mostly retirees in Florida about *The Plan*.

"I have begun meeting with some of the best minds in the country that believe in limited government, maximum freedom and the values of our Founders. I am developing a 100 year plan... All of the above will culminate in *The Plan*, a book that will provide specific policies, principles and, most importantly, action steps that each of us can take to play a role in this Refounding.

"On August 28, 2010, (remember this date!) I ask you, your family and neighbors to join me at the feet of Abraham Lincoln on the National Mall for the unveiling of *The Plan* and the birthday of a new national movement to restore our great country.

"Don't miss updates from Glenn about *The Plan*." ¹⁶

However, after searching Beck's site for more information, nothing comes up. Somewhere in the weeks that followed, Beck's announcement "at the feet of Abraham Lincoln" morphed into a rally for *Restoring Honor*.

"What is the *Restoring Honor Event*?" begins the media fact sheet.

"Throughout history America has seen many great leaders and noteworthy citizens change her course. It is through their personal virtues and by their example that we are able to live as a free people. On August 28, come celebrate America by honoring our heroes, our heritage and our future."

Glenn Beck uses the word "honor" eight times. Nowhere, however, does it mention what Beck's actual theme turned out to be.

8.28.10

If August 28, 2010, at the feet of Abraham Lincoln, offered anything in the name of the iconic 16th president it offered the image of a modern day populist and Coughlin wanna-be a genuine, *Jump-the-Shark* moment. Glenn Beck put on his Fonzi-autographed water skis, donned his waterproof vestments, and lofted himself high above the reflecting pond. Just like Father Coughlin of old, Pastor Beck addressed his flock.

BECK: "Something beyond imagination is happening; something that is beyond man is happening. America today begins to turn back to God." ¹⁷

COUGHLIN: "Today I call upon you to assemble your ranks for action. Thus, in the name of the God of our fathers, we can look forward to better days to come." ¹⁸

BECK: "For too long, this country has wandered in darkness...." ¹⁹

COUGHLIN: "No nation and but few individuals have escaped the atrocities identified with the last sixteen years." ²⁰

BECK: "There's a lot we can disagree on but our values and our principles can unite us. We must discover them again." ²¹

COUGHLIN: But without His principles of justice and of charity reduced into practice there is little hope either for ourselves or for the children who will follow us." ²²

BECK: "God's chosen people were led out of bondage by a guy with a stick who is talking to a burning bush... they didn't want to come to this land, they just did because they felt that's what God was telling them to do." ²³

COUGHLIN: "God wills it! Do You?" ²⁴

The transformation was complete. Glenn Beck, the self-anointed Moses, sees his mission clearly: to lead America out of the "bondage" and the "darkness."

The day following the rally, on *Fox News Sunday*, Beck reiterated, "There's nothing we can do that will solve the problems that we have and keep the peace unless we solve it through God."²⁵

Indeed, according to the same Times article, "Becky Benson, 56, traveled from Orlando, Florida, because, 'we believe in Jesus Christ,' and 'Jesus,' she said, 'would not have agreed with the economic stimulus package, bank bailouts and welfare.' "

On her Web site, *The Sarah Palin Blog*, "The continuing story of the moose hunting, gun toting girl from Alaska who grew up to become an International Pop Star and just might be the leader of the Free World one day," Palin offers a transcript of her speech from the rally whose mission she says is to "...restore America and restore her honor!"²⁶

Of course, neither Palin nor Beck offer any specifics as to *where* "her honor" went and what any restoration process would entail. As for Beck's 100-year plan, no mention has been made on radio, TV, or print.

Until Now...

Broke – The Plan to Restore Our Trust, Truth and Treasure broke out of the publishing gate October 26, 2010. I read the inside flap: "The Facts. The Future. The Fight to Fix America – Before it's too late."²⁷

Sounds like a trailer to some Bruce Willis action movie, doesn't it?

"In the words of Harvard economist Niall Ferguson, the United States is 'an empire on the edge of chaos.' Why? Glenn Beck thinks the answer is pretty simple: Because we've turned our backs on the Constitution.

"*Broke* provides the hope that comes with knowing the truth," the flap continues. "Once you see what we're really up against, it's much easier to develop a realistic plan. To fix ourselves financially," Beck argues, "we have to fix *ourselves* first. That means some serious introspection and, ultimately, a series of actions that will unite all Americans around the concept of shared sacrifice..."

"Packed with great stories from history, chalkboard-style teachable moments, custom illustrations... *Broke* makes the case that when you're

traveling in the wrong direction, slight course corrections won't cut it—you need to take drastic action. Through a return to individual rights, an uncompromising adherence to the Constitution, and a complete rethinking about the role of government in a free society, Glenn exposes the idea of 'transformation' for the progressive smokescreen that it is, and instead builds a compelling case that restoration is the only way forward.”²⁸

I got chills.

True to its promise, *Broke* is an amalgamation of charts, graphs, diagrams, a lot more graphs, a lot more charts. On most of its 351 pages are scattered little boxes like *Teachable Moments*, *Truth Serum*, *Deficit of Trust*, *A.D.D. Moments*, and little quote circles entitled, *Sorry State of the Union*.

“My intention is not to lecture you,” writes Beck on page 247. (Unfortunately, Professor Beck lectured me through the first 246 pages before I got to that statement.) Beck's central thesis is that America is broke from crushing debt due, in large part, to the policies of progressives like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

However, according to an assessment by the liberal, “web-based, not-for-profit” group *Media Matters for America*, “[Beck's] treatment of the Reagan administration makes no effort to hide the fact that Ronald Reagan was a profligate spender who ran up huge deficits. But while the rest of the book traffics in anti-debt hysterics, Beck attempts to spin Reagan's debt-building as necessary, perhaps even salutary: ‘It financed the Cold War military buildup that helped free the world from communism.’

“No such rationalizations are offered for Woodrow Wilson's or Franklin Roosevelt's social spending. Beck's pages-long attack on the economics of Social Security carefully ignores the fact that the program reduced the poverty rate among seniors by about 70 percent. For Beck, spending on the military is acceptable, but spending on the social safety net is Bolshevism.”²⁹

But *wait...* that's not all!

Broke, The Movie

After plunking down a whopping \$18, I watched, Glenn Beck's *Broke: Restarting the Engine of America*, at my local theater.

Broke was filmed, our affable host tells us, in front of a packed 3,000-seat theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The head count in the 2,000-plus-seat

theater where I saw the film was 21... (counting theater staff).

Beck walks on stage to loud, kinetic applause from his Pittsburgh fans. Everyone in my theater held their applause, until he walks over to introduce a classic 1965 Mustang, (my group applauds the Mustang, *loudly*).

The car is a metaphor for the problems facing America. Back in the good old days, Professor Beck explains, an individual could pop the hood, spot the trouble and fix it himself. Today's engines are sealed, preventing the individual from doing anything except rely on experts; "experts," Beck points out, who got us into much of this mess to begin with.

In one of many *chalkboard chats*, Professor Beck, with the help of organizational leadership expert David Buckner, points out the startling fact that interest on the federal debt amounts to \$32 billion per month. In one attention-grabber, Beck shows us how far we've come in a "5000 year leap," of technology by drawing a flat line on a chalk board that rises dramatically at one end of the board. Beck then mounts a portable lift behind the chalkboard, and, carrying a long red tape, continues to elevate the tape à la Al Gore from his *Inconvenient Truth* environment movie.

So what are Beck's solutions to America's problems?

"One, Americans must accept what is coming... Let go of the things we feel entitled to, like *Medicare*, *Social Security*, healthcare, etc." And "Two, we must have 'firm reliance on Divine Providence' and 'mutually pledge our lives, fortunes, and sacred honor' to protecting our republic," Beck says as he quotes The Declaration of Independence.

That's it.

Overall, Beck presents a dazzling array of charts and statistics meant to overpower and alarm and they do! The debt we've amassed is staggering and overwhelming. I'm just not convinced that someone who screams, shouts, jokes, and nearly cries makes the kind of credible and compelling case necessary to tackle the issues we face. Absent specific solutions, Beck's presentation doesn't deliver.

(It does, however, make for a great audition tape. If Broadway producers ever wish to do another revival of *The Music Man*, Beck would make a convincing "Professor" Harold Hill.)

"I went to Yale University for one semester when I was thirty," Beck writes in *The Real America*, "I wish I would have finished – I could guarantee I

would be much more qualified to offer some of the opinion I spout every day... because a formal education helps to discipline the mind. The real benefit of college is not to be taught *what* to think but *how* to think.”³⁰

While Beck is clearly struggling with the “how,” he has no problem telling his audience “what to think.”

Beck’s Ethical Report Card –

Trustworthiness: F According to 21 statements checked by PolitiFact (Feb. 28, 2011), Beck’s “truth” is rarely accurate or straightforward. In one account that PolitiFact deemed “Pants-on-Fire” false, Beck proclaimed Wilmington, Ohio “ground zero” of the recession.

“It went from the No. 1 most up-and-coming city,” Beck declared on his November 22, 2010, radio program, “and a city everybody wants to live in, to ground zero. And this town hasn’t taken any money from the government. They don’t want any money from the government.”

“We asked for Beck’s sources,” PolitiFact writes, “but our e-mails to his producer went unanswered. So, we looked ourselves... [and] quickly found Beck’s story full of holes.

“The city of Wilmington itself has received federal assistance, including money from the federal stimulus bill that Beck often rails against. Government and social service agencies that serve residents of Wilmington and surrounding Clinton and Clark counties have received state and federal money. Development agencies and companies in Wilmington have received state aid or pledges of state aid. Unemployed residents of the town and county are receiving unemployment and other jobless benefits.”³¹

In another example where Beck consistently misleads his listeners, the Fox host claimed, on November 12, 2009, that “In the health care bill, we’re now offering insurance to dogs.” PolitiFact again found this to be “Pants-on-Fire” false.

Respect: F Beck is a walking-talking contradiction. While he frequently espouses a return to God’s principles, as well as Faith, Hope, and Charity, the majority of his rhetoric indicates otherwise. Whether it’s calling President Obama “a racist,” or telling 9/11 victims to “shut up... because they’re always complaining,” Beck rarely practices what he preaches.

Responsibility: F Like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck ignores any thought of self-discipline (much less Christian charity) in making statements like “I say

we nuke the bastards (regarding Iran),” and comparing Obama’s “spending money on embryonic stem cell research [to]...eugenics,” as well as declaring “[American] universities... are as dangerous with the indoctrination of the children as terrorists are in Iran or North Korea....”

Citizenship: D Amid all his fulminating rhetoric, Beck writes that “achieving the American Dream... takes relentless dedication to your core principles and values, and, above all, patience,” and encourages readers that “Common sense tells us that supporting the individual of our choice, after having studied his position on the issues, is never a waste.” Sadly, statements like this are few and far between and become disingenuous when compared to his personal attacks.

(Archduke Ferdinand Moments: A+)

Overall, Glenn Beck’s Coughlin-esque charm is not lost on the many fans who hold strong religious convictions; and just as Father Coughlin’s pronouncements grew more canonical, Beck frequently – and just as dangerously – professes to speak *for* God. “The plan that He would have me articulate is get behind *Me*,” and “I haven’t seen Jesus and what he would do on a talk show... but I’m going to try.”

While most Americans may find statements like this laughable, it’s important to remember that Beck’s “daily audience approaches 11 million people.” ³²

“You know,” Beck confesses to his radio audience, “we all have our inner demons. I can’t speak for you, but I’m on the verge of moral collapse at any time. It can happen by the end of the show.” ³³

Guess what Glenn, you’re there.

**A great many people think they are thinking
when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.**

– Edward R. Murrow

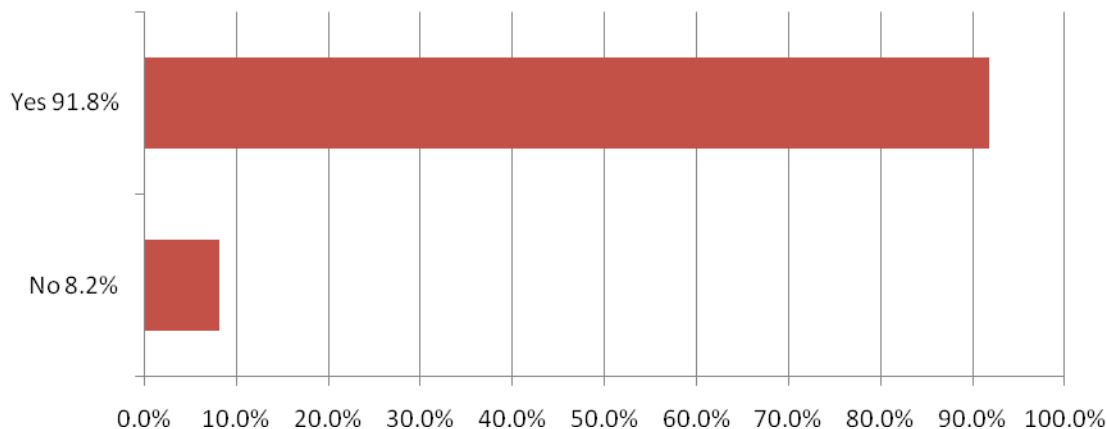
How reliable is the information that comes from commentators from the left and the right? Does the public listen to these individuals for news, analysis, opinion or is it all just entertainment? Whom do they trust the most and how important are the facts they put forth?

In the course of my research, I wanted to get some sense of people's thoughts and attitudes on many of these individuals. With the help of Senior Analyst Jamie O'Boyle from The Center for Cultural Studies and Analysis, I drafted an informal poll and posted it online. The Center is a Philadelphia think tank and "media resource for all topics in culture and human behavior."

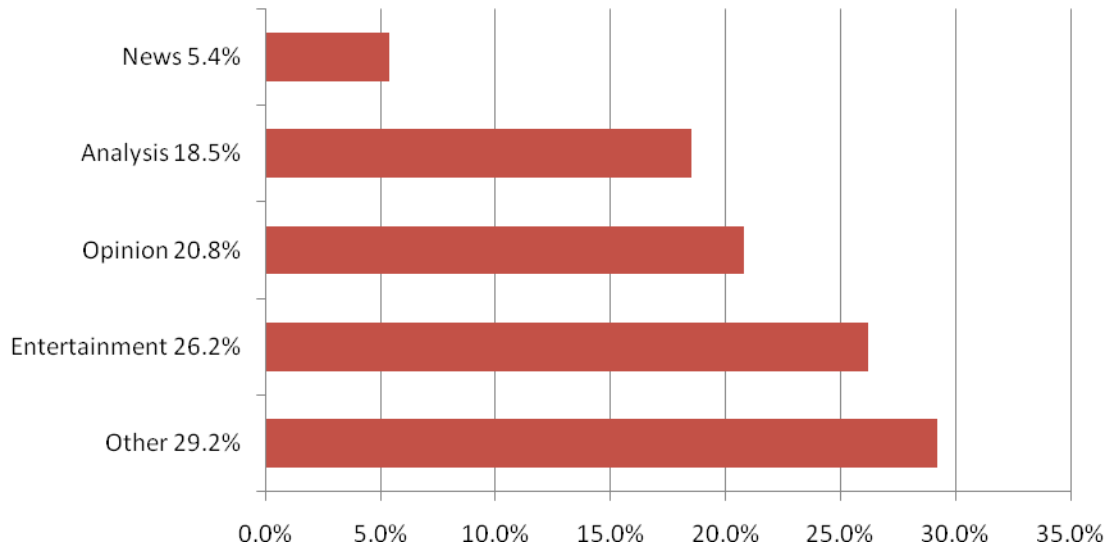
138 individuals responded to the Conservative survey; 104 responded to the Liberal version. Adjustments were made to both surveys with respect to total responses and political identification in order to reflect a more balanced assessment. Some percentages may not total 100% due to those who skipped some questions.

However, according to O'Boyle, the results are probably a reasonable reflection of the public's thoughts and attitudes about those commentators that were polled. First, the raw numbers:

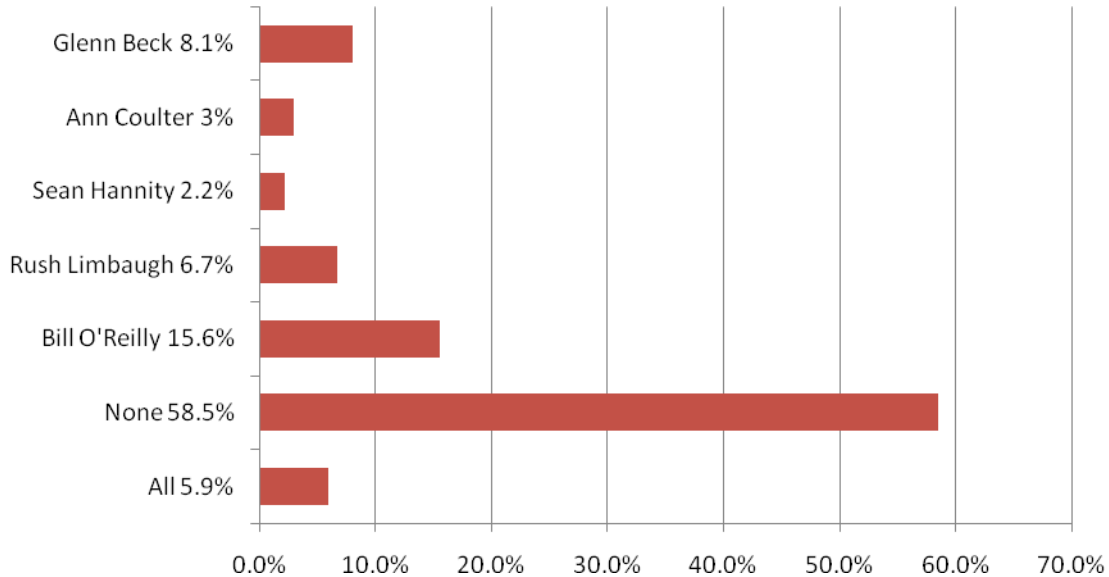
**Have you ever listened to Glenn Beck, Ann
Coulter, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh or
Bill O'Reilly?**



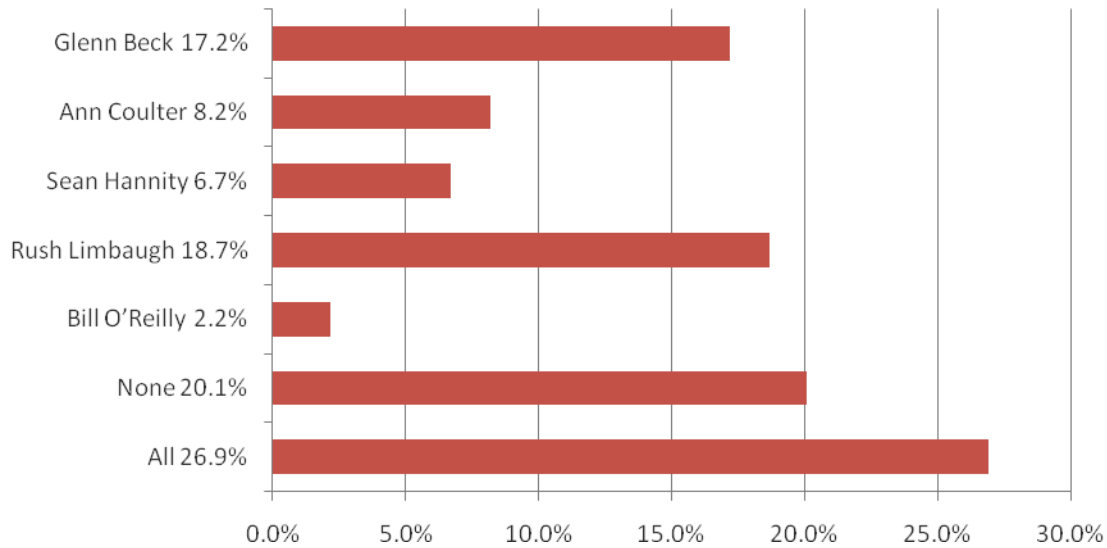
I listen to these commentators primarily for:



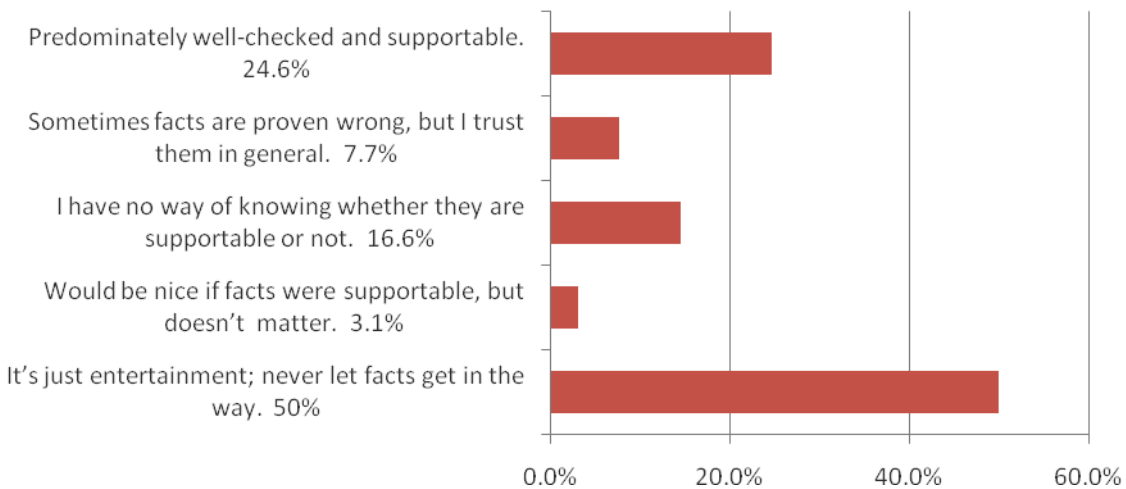
Who are you most likely to trust?



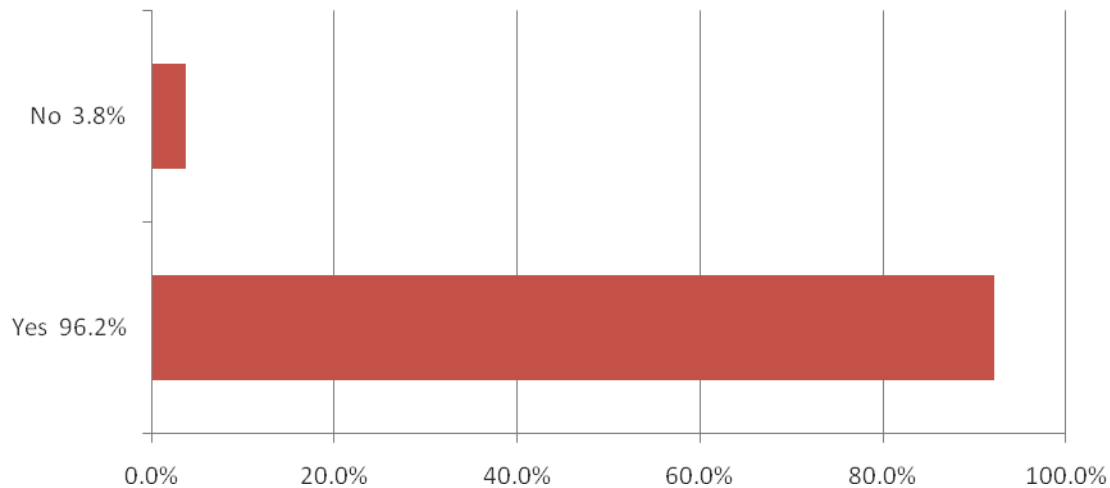
Who are you least likely to trust?



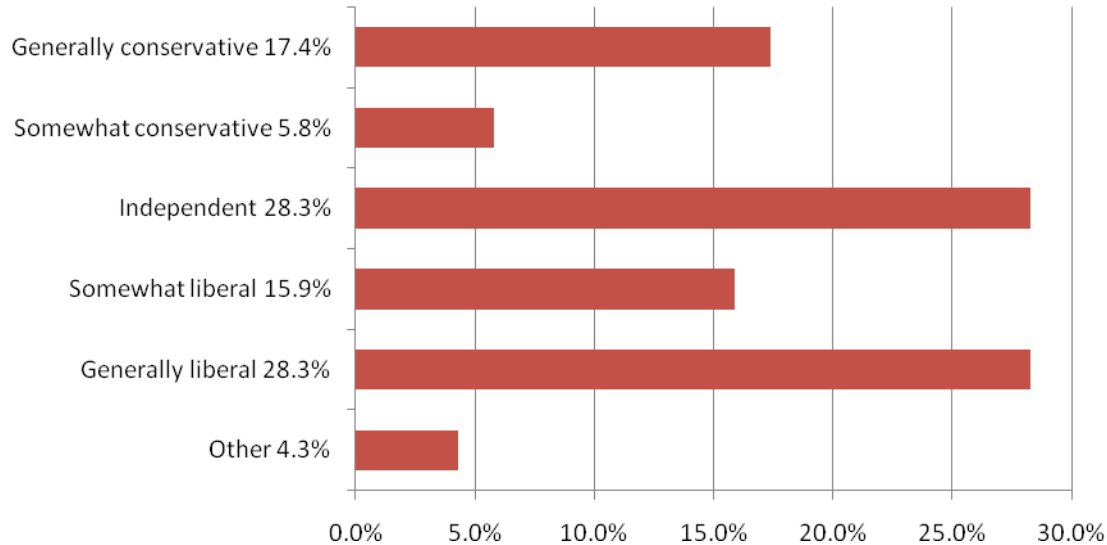
Do you feel that statements of facts from these commentators are:



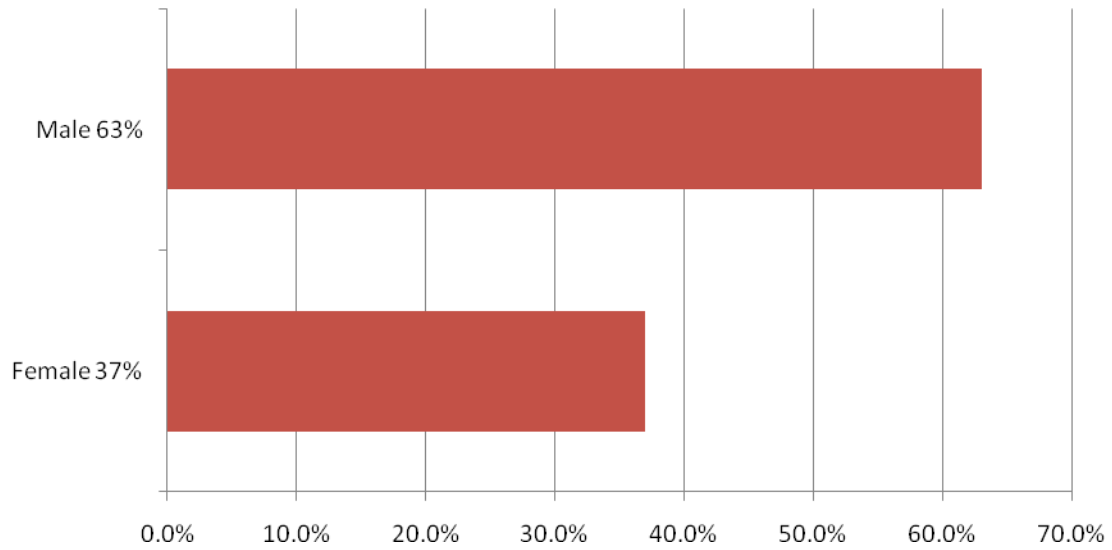
If factual errors occur, do you believe these commentators should make a correction?



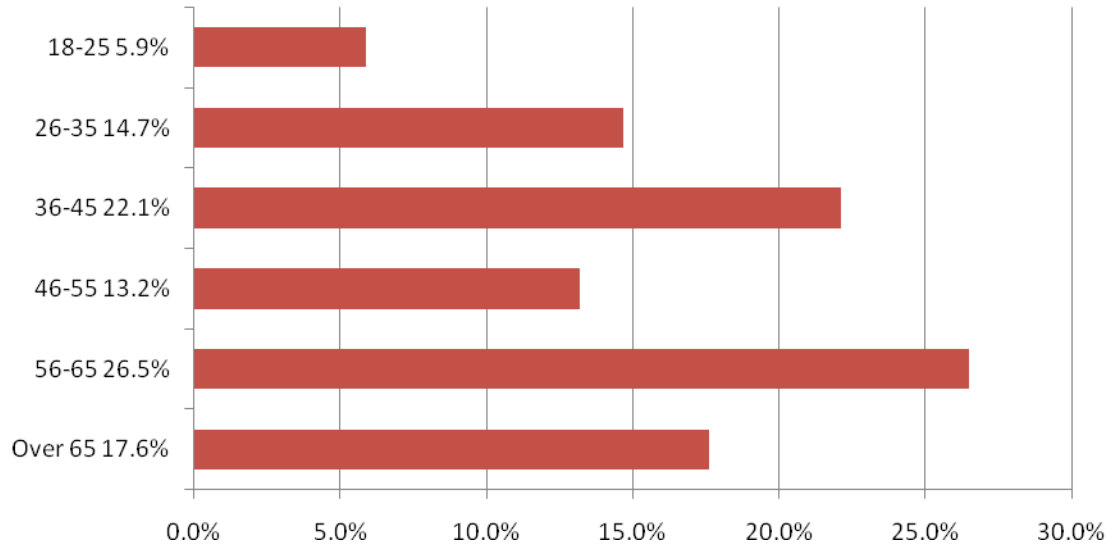
How would you identify yourself, politically?



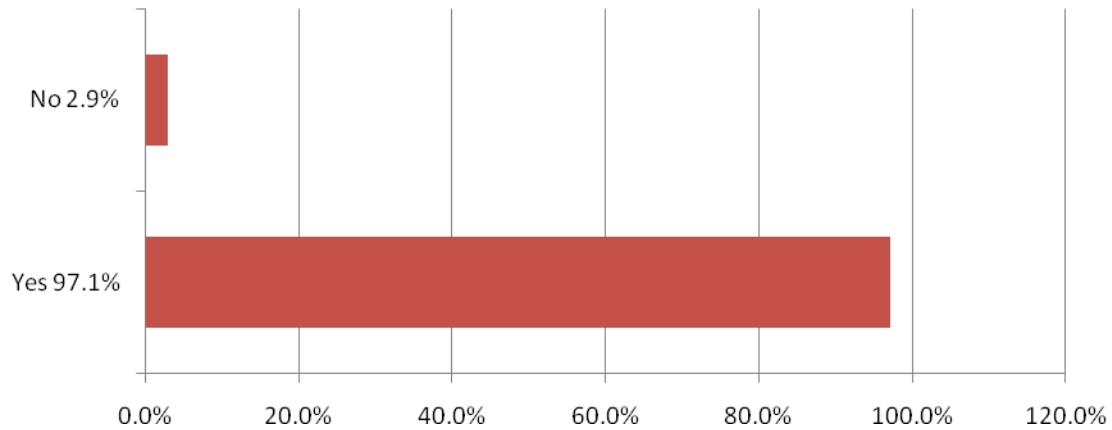
Gender



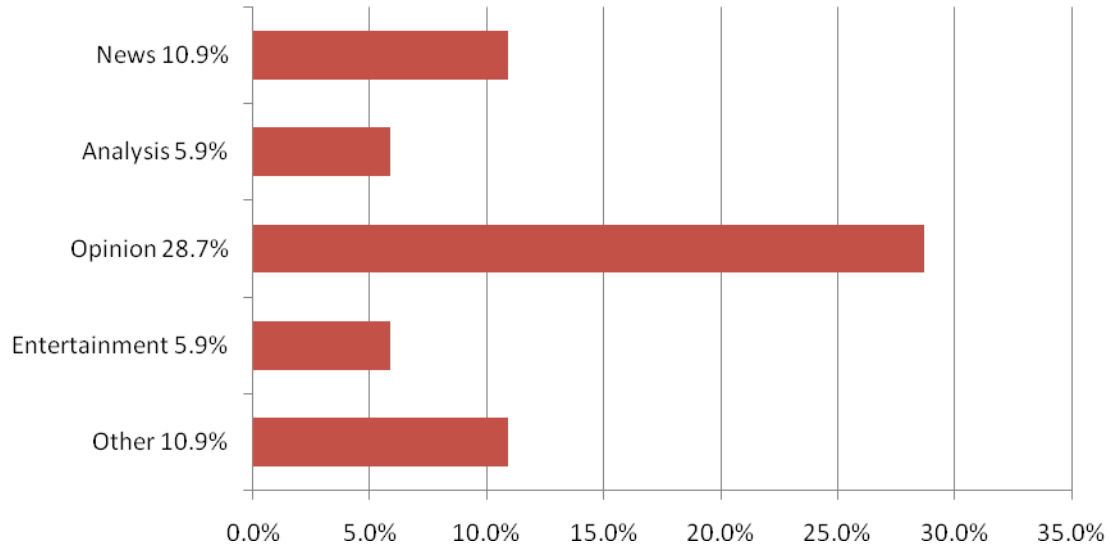
Age



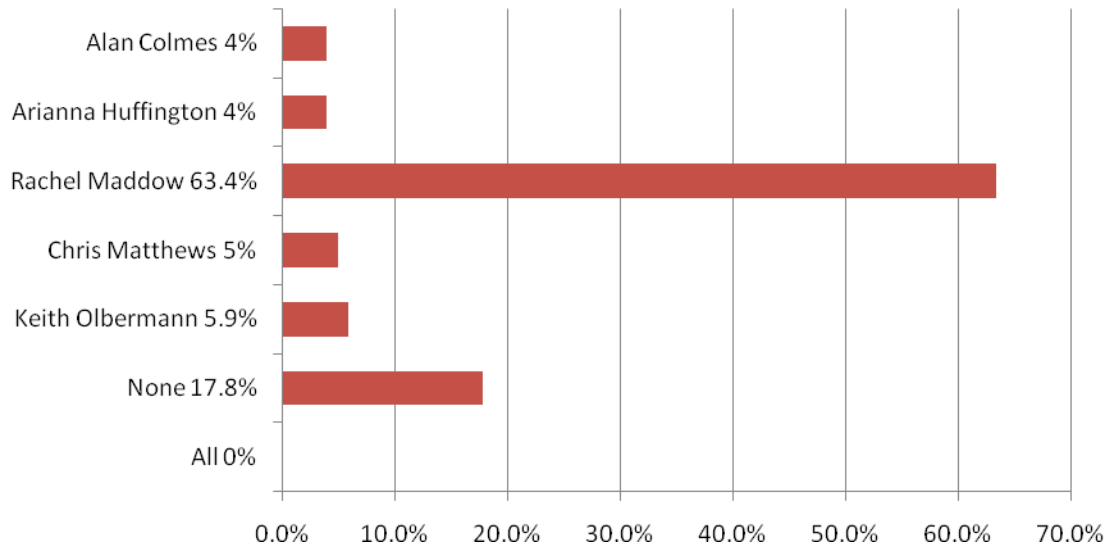
**Have you ever listened to Alan Colmes,
Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow,
Chris Matthews or Keith Olbermann?**



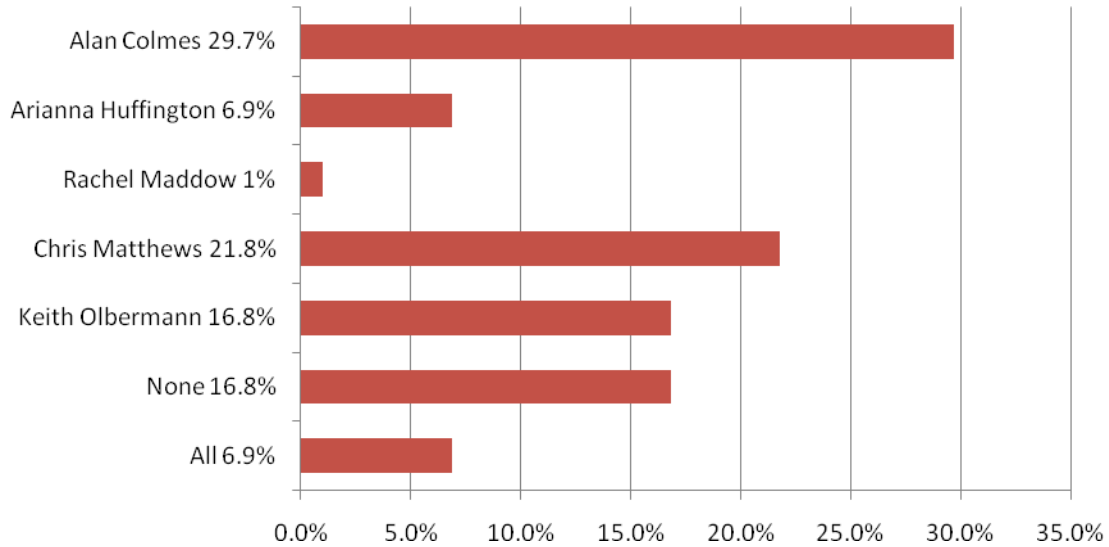
I listen to these commentators primarily for:



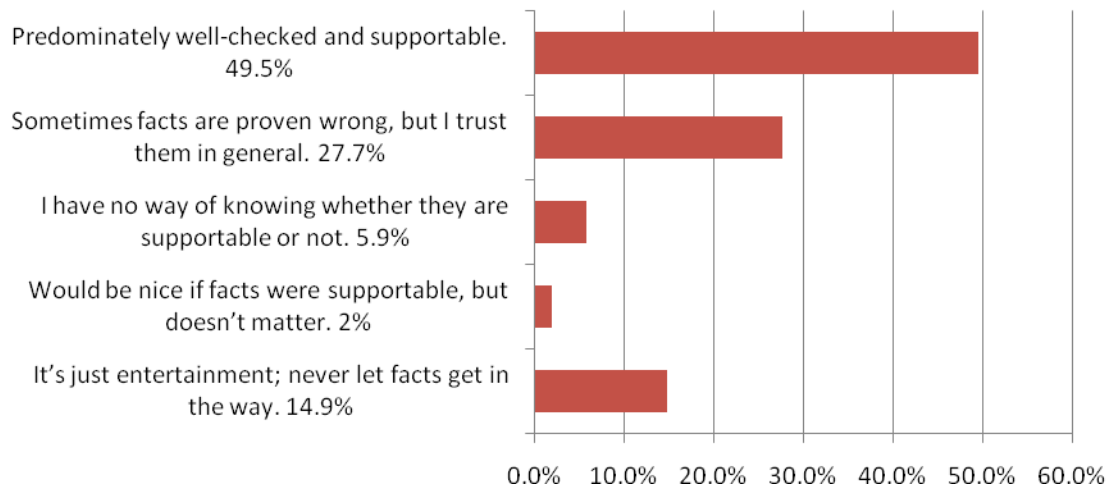
Who are you most likely to trust?



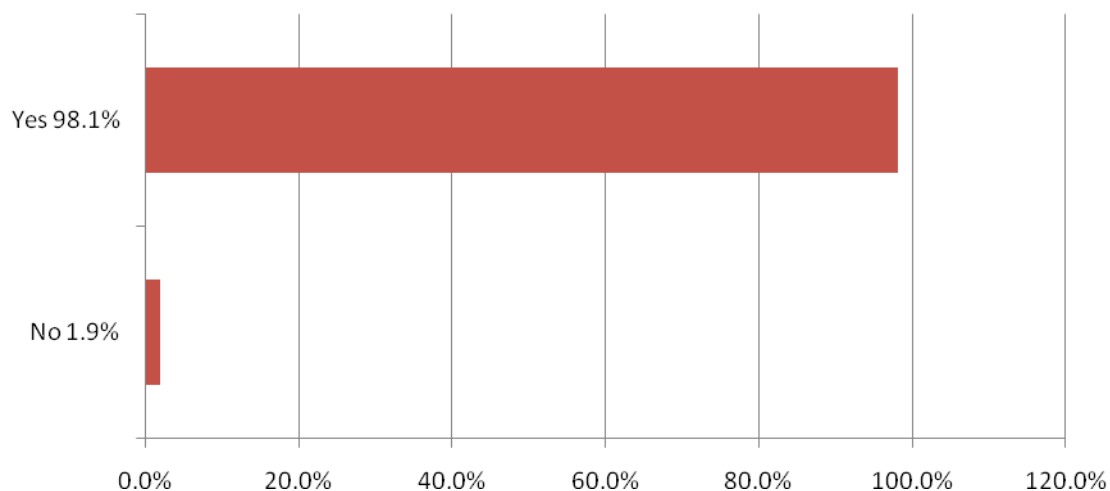
Who are you least likely to trust?



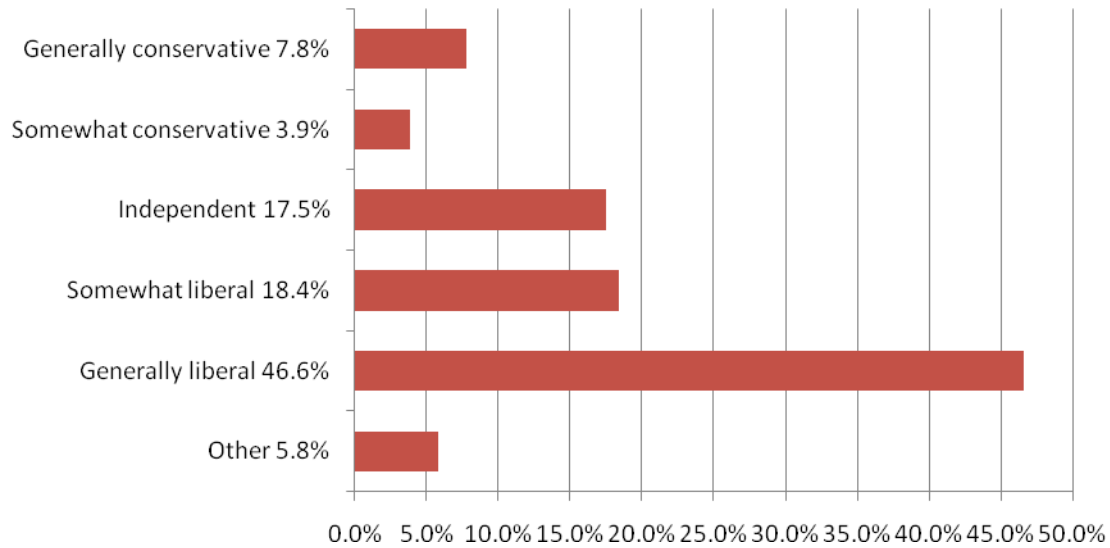
Do you feel that statements of facts from these commentators are:



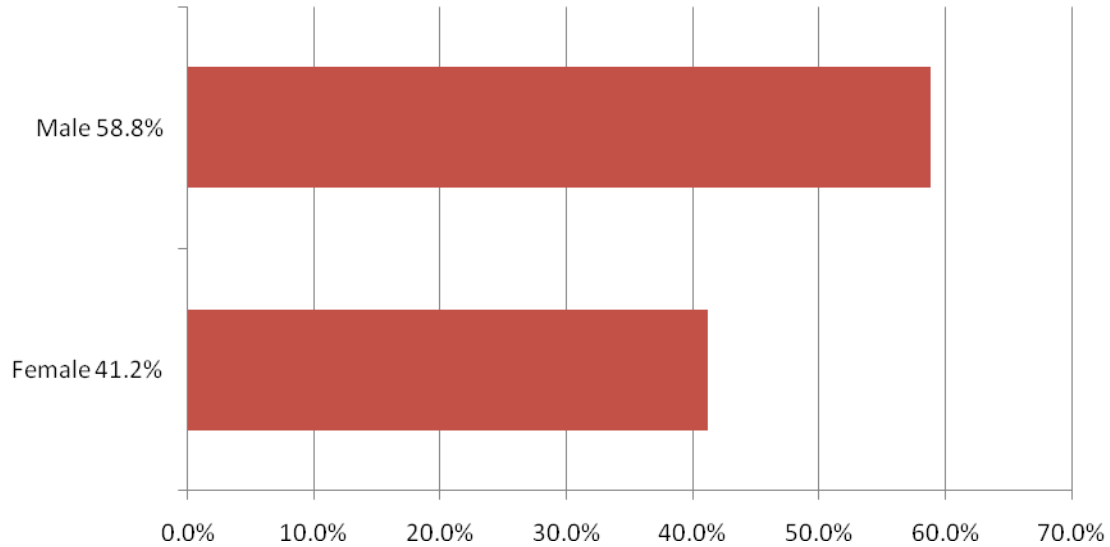
If factual errors occur, do you believe these commentators should make a correction?

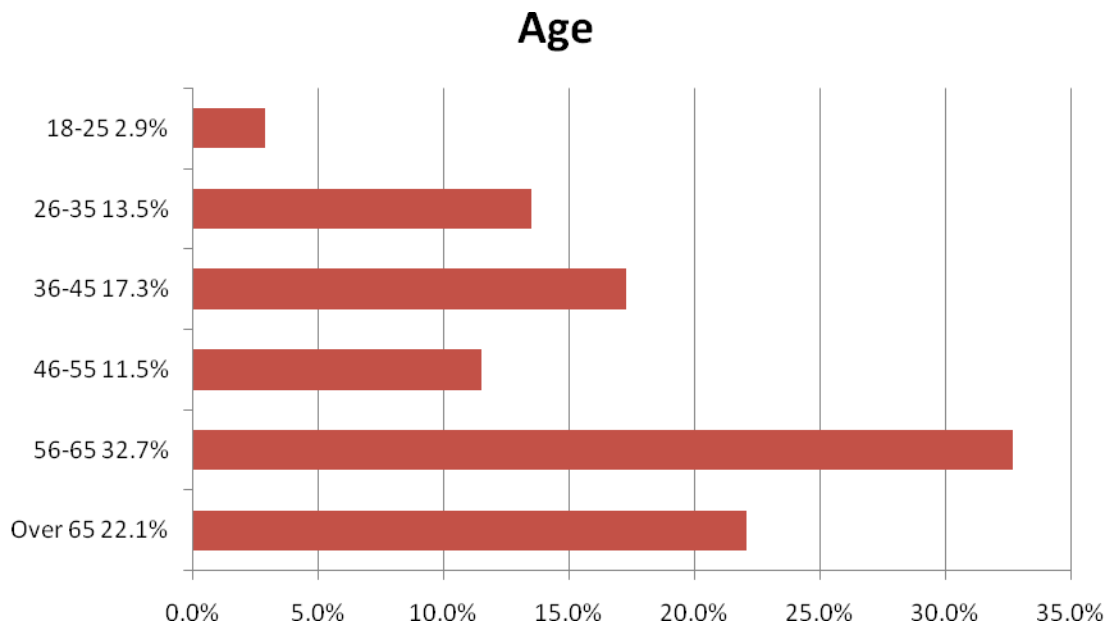


How would you identify yourself, politically?



Gender





Analysis by Jamie O'Boyle –

Some minor adjustments were made in order to clarify the results. Stripping away the individuals who identified themselves as in the liberal camp from the Conservative survey eliminated "other" and "entertainment" as significant responses in Question #2, and moved "analysis" into the first position, "opinion" into the second position, and "news" into third. Removing the self-declared conservatives from the liberal survey had the same result.

In other words, if the respondent of either survey tended to agree with the content, then these programs were considered analysis, opinion, or news. If the respondents generally disagreed with the content, then they considered these programs as entertainment or "other."

This edit brought both surveys into alignment, with identical questions getting similar response patterns. This, in our analysis, signifies a high degree of confidence in the answers since, while the political content of these shows is in opposition, the need they fill in the audience, and the niche – mass customization – they fill in the marketplace of ideas is identical.

Mass Customization: A Brief Primer

The concept of mass customization is attributed to Stan Davis in *Future Perfect*, (1987). It was then further developed by Joseph Pine in his book *Mass Customization - The New Frontier in Business Competition*, (1992) and was defined by Tseng & Jiao, (2001) as "producing goods and services to meet individual customer's needs with near mass production efficiency."¹

Richard Chase, F. Robert Jacobs & Nicholas Aquilano (2006) define Mass Customization as the method of "effectively postponing the task of differentiating a product for a specific customer until the latest possible point in the supply network."²

Joe Pine (*not* '60s commentator Joe Pyne) described four types of mass customization:

Collaborative customization - (also considered co-creation) firms talk to individual customers to determine the precise product offering that best serves the customer's needs. This information is then used to specify and manufacture a product that suits that specific customer.

Adaptive customization - firms produce a standardized product, but this product is customizable in the hands of the end-user. (Automobiles sell a basic unit; the customers buy optional equipment to make the car "theirs.")

Transparent customization - firms provide individual customers with unique products, without explicitly telling them that the products are customized. In this case there is a need to accurately assess customer needs.

Cosmetic customization - firms produce a standardized physical product, but market it to different customers in unique ways.

Of these, Pine's Collaborative Customization model is essentially used by Fox news and MSNBC with the audience as co-creators.

Mass Customization and the Media

The days of limited choice in news sources are long gone. In the post-WWII era, networks controlled a limited number of TV news programs, and, like any commercial product, these programs were aimed at the middle of a standard deviation – the largest mass-market audience possible.

Today, interactive technologies, such as the Internet and social media like Facebook and Twitter allow customers to interact with a company and specify their unique requirements, from which responses are then created that best fit those needs. The details of the collaboration, whether generated

by staff, third-party collaboration, or some other intermediary, are invisible to the consumer.

These interactive technologies provide a new tool for customer participation in the creation of their own unique custom products. In the media, shifts in audience interest can be measured and analyzed for new market opportunities and programs designed to appeal to specific groups, both current and emerging.

Don't think of these programs in political terms, think of them as products in an evolving consumer universe. For example, for more than half a century, Americans drank Coca-Cola. In the 1960s, their choices expanded to Coca-Cola and Diet Coke, and that held for the next 25 years. Today we have Coca-Cola, Caffeine-Free Coca-Cola, Diet Coke Caffeine-Free, Coca-Cola Cherry, Coca-Cola Zero, Coca-Cola Vanilla, and special editions with lemon, lime, or coffee.

The same principle applies to media products. We once had a single mainstream product with three major network competitors competing for the mainstream market, just as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and RC competed in the cola market.

Today, the technology – from cable splitting up the network monopoly to social media and instant feedback – allows the media to serve up products to smaller, but profitable, niche markets.

This isn't an entirely new concept. When newspapers were the principal medium, major cities would have a half-dozen or more choices of newspapers – each with a specific political point of view. Consumers could choose the paper that best reflected their worldview. Papers would battle it out for the hearts and minds of the reader.

Over time, a number of factors combined to erode the strident voice in mass media. Newspaper consolidation into a few large syndicates was the first. The voices were still unique, but they were fewer and had national reach. In the last half of the twentieth century, the professionalization and unionization of journalism further limited the power of the media magnates to dictate content.

The emerging technology of radio provided a new forum for the independent voice in the 1930s and 40s. Commentary was popular programming on all sides of the political spectrum. Populist commentators like Charles Coughlin, were the rock stars of the Midwest of the time. Radio (later TV) hosts like Joe Pyne pioneered the confrontational interview style. Again, market

consolidation into three national networks, sensitive to politically skittish advertisers, killed a lot of the more distinctive and challenging commentary.

Cable TV is the current medium of choice for consumers looking to find meaning and validate their worldview, but the need to do so - and the media's attempts to satisfy that need - has a long history.

Evolution of the Audience: Where does the need come from?

Humans are perpetually a work in progress. As we age, we imprint on values when they first stir emotions — nurturing from infancy, basic values from childhood, music from teenage years, fashion from the mate-seeking period. These values stick with us for the rest of our lives, although they shift in priority during certain life stages. For example: Independence slips down in priority when we have children, reasserts itself after the kids are grown, hence the phenomenon of empty-nesters divorcing after 40 years of marriage.

The fact that so many values are formed in childhood and teen years helps explain why, as we hit our 60s, so many of our important memories are of our youth, and so few are from middle-age. When we are “norming” in our 60s, we are comparing the perceived values of our world today with the values of the time in which they were first imprinted. Hence the “Take Back...” tone to conservative programming. “Take Back” is simply a dramatic way of saying “Return To...” , meaning the idealized time when we felt we understood - and therefore had some control over - what was going on around us.

Ages 60 and up are a time for Resolution. We transform into a distinctive new entity about every 20 years: from teenager to young adult, from young adult to maturity, from maturity to a cycle of reflection and resolution of the contradictions of our own identity.

At every stage of this process, brand loyalty can disappear when the consumer moves into a new development stage where the values originally perceived in the product no longer hold high priority, or the product itself is perceived as having changed to the point where the values no longer exist. Hence the phenomena of lifelong Labor Union members voting hardcore Republican, lifelong Democrats switching parties, lifelong Republicans changing their registration to Independent, etc.

In our 50s, we stop buying material goods and start buying experiences. In our 60s, we taper off the experiences and start looking for meaning - Resolution. We do this by “norming” - searching out people or media with

similar values and trying to make sense of a changed world and resolve our place in it. You can see this on a local scale any morning at small-town diners or McDonald's when the retirees gather to discuss the state of their world. When they come to some agreement on what it's all about, or at least know where everyone stands, they go their separate ways with some confidence that they know what's going on, at least for the moment.

This is the market political commentary fills. With the Baby-Boomers – our largest market segment – turning 60 for the next 15 years, we are in a growth market for people looking for validation and resolution. The majority of respondents to both surveys are in the 60-plus age groups. TV and radio commentators across the political spectrum follow the Coca-Cola, Caffeine-Free Coca-Cola, Diet Coke Caffeine-Free model. The audience can choose from Angry White Guy, Angry Black Guy, Snarky White Guy, Angry White Female, Sarcastic White Guy, Witty Gay Female, etc. Regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum, they fill the same needs, just offering different flavors for different tastes.

Summary

Once you strip out the self-identified liberals from your conservative survey, the answers to both surveys are almost identical. The audience sees these politically-focused cable shows primarily as analysis and commentary, followed by news.

The popular perception of a journalist is someone who reports on events, issues, and trends to a broad audience. By this standard the audience considers these people as journalists and holds them to the same standards as those in other media. That is, they believe that the facts presented on these programs are generally supportable and they overwhelmingly believe that errors in fact should be corrected. The fact that their unconscious confirmation bias minimizes contrary information operates at a level well below their conscious horizon.

We looked at these programs, not in political terms, but in terms of what important audience need they fill. As such, the explosive growth of commentary programming today is most likely a regression to the mean³ – reverting back to the historical norm of information flow for the U.S.A. While younger and middle-aged adults have grown up in a period of media consolidation (multiple media providing identical news from the same source), the historical norm for America has been one of many competing outlets searching out the news and putting their own interpretation on the results. Newspapers were once this medium. Today, it is cable television and that old standby, radio, that provide the platform for these competing

voices.

America has been media-rich since before our founding as a nation - and those media had strong points of view that often came into conflict with authority or public opinion. As the newspaper example we cited earlier illustrated, much of that media traditionally had a distinct personal bias well into the post-WWII era. Media consolidation gradually brought information flow into the hands of a few corporations, homogenizing news and stilling many unique, if discordant, voices.

Today, cable TV and the Internet have opened up new venues for the return of a very old American dynamic of competing voices battling for mind share.

The value of these programs for those seeking meaning and resolution – their primary audience according to this survey – is both in validating their worldview and giving them some feeling of community and control in a rapidly-changing world.

The value of these programs to society is that they raise issues – often uncomfortable issues – and they force the rest of us to deal with them. We understand that statement has an American cultural bias towards freedom of speech and the marketplace of ideas. You might not like what the other guy says, the way he says it, or the fact that you can't believe anyone would be dumb enough to believe it, but that's your bias speaking, not his.

The growth and influence of commentary programming on TV makes for a political landscape that is messy, frustrating, and often mean-spirited. It challenges – and often mocks – our deeply held beliefs. It makes us angry. It forces us to deal with issues we'd rather not, and revisit issues we thought were resolved.

But then, that's also a pretty fair description of America.

**To be persuasive we must be believable;
to be believable we must be credible;
[to be] credible we must be truthful.**

– Edward R. Murrow

What is particularly striking about both surveys is that whether respondents believed that the statements made by these commentators were “predominately well-checked and supportable,” or considered “just entertainment,” an overwhelming number (96 percent from the Conservative survey, 98 percent from the Liberal) believe that “if factual errors occur [all commentators] should make a correction.”

As O’Boyle’s analysis makes clear, “The popular perception of a journalist is someone who reports on events, issues, and trends to a broad audience. By this standard the audience considers these people as journalists and holds them to the same standards as those in other media.”

In their 2001 book, *The Elements of Journalism*, authors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write, “We need news to live our lives, to protect ourselves, bond with each other, identify friends and enemies. Journalism is simply the system societies generate to supply this news. That is why we care about the character of news and journalism we get: they influence the quality of our lives, our thoughts, and our culture.”¹

In 1991, ethicist Michael Josephson, president and founder of The Josephson Institute of Ethics, translated his *Six Pillars of Character* (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) into actionable principles for journalists.

“As an aspect of our commitment to a free and vigorous press,” Josephson writes, “journalism is a form of public trust requiring the unselfish pursuit of three public service functions:

1. *Teacher* – informing us of things we ought to know to make us better citizens and persons.
2. *Conscience* – confronting us with opinions and facts which challenge us to live up to our values and beliefs.
3. *Watchdog* – uncovering and exposing corruption, mismanagement, waste, hypocrisy and other forms of impropriety which threaten public interests.”

Among the ethical considerations Josephson believes journalists should follow are:

"Credibility – The powers of the press should be treated as a public trust. Journalists must inspire credibility – faith and confidence in the honesty, accuracy and fairness of the information they convey.

Responsibility – The powers of the press should be used responsibly to advance public interest without causing unjustified harm. As a watchdog, the press should be fair, vigilant and aggressive in assuring that people of influence are held accountable. As a public conscience, it should remind citizens of their ideals and values and the way events bear on them. As a teacher, it should inform, clarify and explain about matters of social consequence and know without pandering unduly to public dispositions to be entertained and titillated.

Integrity – Journalists should be principled, honorable and upright; avoid self-righteousness, have the courage of their convictions, express and fight for their beliefs, and live by ethical principles to the best of their ability.

Honesty – Journalists should be honest, truthful, sincere, forthright, straightforward and, unless professional duties otherwise require, be frank and candid. They do not lie, deceive, act deviously, cheat, steal, plagiarize, stage news or photos, alter or invent quotations or characters, or knowingly mislead by omission or other means.

Respect – Journalists should demonstrate respect for human dignity, privacy, autonomy for others, and the right of self-determination by treating people with respect, courtesy and decency and by providing information needed to make informed decisions.

Citizenship – Journalists should abide by the law and exercise their civic rights and responsibilities by voting and expressing informed views, demonstrating social consciousness and public service.

Excellence – Journalists should continually seek to develop the knowledge, skills and judgment necessary to the performance of their duties; they should be diligent, reliable, careful, prepared and informed.

Accountability – Journalists should accept moral responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of actions and inactions, including the example set for others and when in error, they should make full, fair, prominent and prompt corrections." ²

While Coulter, Limbaugh, and Beck most certainly “confront us with opinions... which challenge,” their hyper-partisan rhetoric is so focused on the role of “watchdog,” as they define it, that they push aside the notion of “informing us of things we ought to know to make us better citizens and persons.” Calling the president “a racist,” as Beck has; middle easterner’s “ragheads,” as Coulter has; or Mexicans “stupid and unskilled,” as Limbaugh has, certainly does not embrace the concepts of respect and accountability as ethicist Josephson defines them.

Further, their inflammatory and inaccurate statements demonstrate a clear lack of ethical integrity due to consistently placing their own interests ahead of any rational and responsible debate on the issues that currently challenge America.

“In the end journalism is an act of character,” write Kovach and Rosenstiel.

“Since there are no laws of journalism, no regulations, no licensing, and no formal self-policing, and since journalism by its nature can be exploitative, a heavy burden rests on the ethics and judgment of the individual journalist and the individual organization where he or she works.”³

Although opinion does not necessarily encompass fairness where an opinion maker presents both sides of an issue, there is an implied obligation for any responsible individual with the public’s trust not to carelessly or deliberately distort, misrepresent, “or knowingly mislead by omission or other means,” the facts, as all three have done. Additionally, all three demonstrate a sense of self-righteousness that is both unreasonable and reckless, and their power to persuade may, in fact, result in unjustified harm.

On July 18, 2010, Byron Williams was pulled over by the California Highway Patrol. The ex-felon fired upon approaching officers. After his arrest, a CHP sergeant reported “There is no doubt in our mind, given the body armor and the extensive amount of ammunition [Williams] had, that he was on his way to do a very serious crime against either someone or a group of people.”

According to the not-for-profit (liberal) research and information center Media Matters for America, “Williams reportedly told investigators that ‘his intention was to start a revolution by traveling to San Francisco and killing people of importance at the Tides Foundation and the ACLU.’”

“The ACLU is a very well-known entity, but the Tides Foundation,” Media Matters wrote, “which seeks to ‘promote economic justice, robust democratic processes, and the opportunity to live in a healthy and sustainable environment where human rights are preserved and protected,’ is much

more obscure.”⁴

According to his mother, Williams “watched the news on television and was upset by ‘the way Congress was railroading through all these left-wing agenda items.’ ”⁵

“We don't know what Williams was watching,” Media Matters said, “or that television played a role in his decision to target Tides. However, if it did, according to our Nexis searches, the primary person on cable or network news talking about the Tides Foundation in the year and a half prior to the shootout was Fox News’ Glenn Beck.”⁶

Just days before Williams’ gun battle with CHP, Beck discussed the Tides Foundation twice.

On July 14, Beck said, “You believe that America is the last best hope for the free world. Boy, was I a moron for believing that. Nope, there are a lot of people that believe that we are the oppressor. This man states it. He states in this book ‘The purpose is to create mass organizations to seize power.’ Wow! That almost sounds like the Tides Foundation.”⁷

On July 13, Beck said, “Well, they have the education system. They have the media. They have the capitalist system. What do you think the Tides Foundation was? They infiltrate and they saw under Ronald Reagan that capitalists were not for all of this nonsense, so they infiltrated. Now, they are using failing capitalism to destroy it.”⁸

As Washington Post columnist and Beck critic Dana Milbank points out “It's not fair to blame Beck for violence committed by people who watch his show.” However, “Beck has at times spoken against violence but more often forecasts it, warning that ‘it is only a matter of time before an actual crazy person really does something stupid.’ ”⁹

Whether it's news or opinion, to be credible, Murrow reminds us, we *must* be truthful.

With millions listening, Beck, Coulter, and Limbaugh clearly appear to place credibility and the public's trust behind their own egos.

**All lies and jests, still a man hears
what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.**

– Paul Simon

So, why do so many people continue to believe Beck, Limbaugh, and Coulter in spite of the facts? That's the question I asked Cultural Studies analyst Jamie O'Boyle. His answer – it's a little thing called *confirmation bias*.

"The human brain is a meaning-seeking device," O'Boyle writes. "Although Western culture has a strong bias toward the importance of conscious 'rational' thought, over 90% of our decisions are made at an unconscious level.¹ Thanks to brain imaging, we now know that, when the brain inputs data, the emotional centers light up first (what does this mean to me?), followed by the logic centers (what do I do with it?). To a very large degree, this means that 'facts' are what people use to validate decisions already made at an unconscious level.

"One of the outcomes of this process is a confirmation bias – the tendency of our brain to easily accept information compatible with what we already know and – more importantly – *minimize* information that contradicts what we already know, *even if what we 'know' isn't true!*

"The unconscious weighing of information is one of the reasons it is so difficult to change people's minds using logic. The information goes in but the importance the brain allots to each bit minimizes the effect of negative data while weighting more heavily the bits that already fit their preconceptions and worldview.

"This is a principal reason," O'Boyle concludes, "why people don't recall that commentators have given them information that was proven to be false. Their unconscious brain simply diminished its importance in favor of some other bit of information, and even the little that did get through faded rapidly from memory."

Newsweek magazine's science editor and author, Sharon Begley, writes "Women are bad drivers, Saddam plotted 9/11, Obama was not born in America, and Iraq had weapons of mass destruction: to believe any of these requires suspending some of our critical-thinking faculties and succumbing instead to the kind of irrationality that drives the logically minded crazy.

"It helps, for instance, to use confirmation bias (seeing and recalling only evidence that supports your beliefs, so you can recount examples of women driving 40mph in the fast lane). It also helps not to test your beliefs against

empirical data (where, exactly, are the WMD, after seven years of U.S. forces crawling all over Iraq?); not to subject beliefs to the plausibility test (faking Obama's birth certificate would require how widespread a conspiracy?); and to be guided by emotion (the loss of thousands of American lives in Iraq feels more justified if we are avenging 9/11)." ²

In a New York Times op-ed about the myths surrounding the newly passed health care bill, political scientist and health policy researcher Brendan Nyhan at the University of Michigan writes, "Jason Reifler, a political scientist at Georgia State, and I conducted a series of experiments in which participants read mock news articles with misleading statements by a politician. Some were randomly assigned a version of the article that also contained information correcting the misleading statement.

"Our results indicate that this sort of journalistic fact-checking often fails to reduce misperceptions among ideological or partisan voters. In some cases, we found that corrections can even make misperceptions worse. For example, in one experiment we found that the proportion of conservatives who believed that President George W. Bush's tax cuts actually increased federal revenue grew from 36 percent to 67 percent when they were provided with evidence against this claim. People seem to argue so vehemently against the corrective information that they end up strengthening the misperception in their own minds.

"We've seen this happen already with Sarah Palin's claim that her parents and baby would 'have to stand in front of Obama's *death panel*.' After this claim was widely discredited in the press, some conservative pundits retreated to claims that future rationing of health care would amount to '*de facto* death panels.'" ³

Delivering a commencement address at Yale University, President Kennedy said, "The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie – deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought." ⁴

**When the word is in your mouth, you are the master.
When the word is out of your mouth, you are the slave.**

– Murray Richman

Murray Richman is a fast-talking, New York lawyer with an easy manner and a talent to rationalize. He acquired the nickname “Don’t Worry Murray” due to his considerable skill in obtaining acquittals for those clients who would otherwise be found guilty in less than a New York minute. Murray’s facility with getting a jury to believe most anything is legendary. However, as his quote makes clear, more people have been tripped up by their own words than anything else. And when it comes to political commentators whose stock in trade is language, many have faced the slave galleys of their own making.

This brings me to Keith Olbermann.

Like Richman, Olbermann talks fast but usually has a point that speaks to a broader issue. Although the former MSNBC host frequents the left side of the political fence, he has described himself as “...not a liberal; I’m an American.” Olbermann is one side of the political coin, with Bill O’Reilly occupying the obverse. While both have sounded shrill and pompous, the difference is Olbermann cares more about an issue; O’Reilly cares more about himself.

Years ago, I visited KCBS-TV in Los Angeles when Olbermann was reporting Sports. When the red light atop the camera came on, his words and presence leaped out of the gate. Since joining the political fray, Olbermann has brought that same fast-out-of-the-gate approach to his commentaries that have, for the most part, reflected a reasoned and impassioned approach to an issue. However, those words and passion have presented problems.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Olbermann and MSNBC host Chris Matthews were selected to co-anchor NBC’s coverage of the Democratic National convention. It was a disaster due largely to the extreme partisanship that both men shamelessly demonstrated. Even NBC anchor Tom Brokaw, who’s rarely given to open criticism within the ranks, publically acknowledged, “I think Keith has gone too far. I think Chris has gone too far.”¹

“At such a critical time in political affairs,” I wrote in a commentary at the time, “do we really need a pair of talking heads giving us provocative rhetoric masking as objective reporting?”²

In November 2010, I pointed out that Olbermann's fervor often gets the better of him particularly in his non-stop "...rebuttal against anything that comes from Fox News." I pointed out that Olbermann can get his facts wrong and cited PolitiFact as a source on statements he put forth to viewers on his July 6, 2010, program concerning tax subsidies. At one point, the MSNBC host said "Subsidies for oil and gas companies make up 88 percent of all federal subsidies. Just cutting the oil and gas subsidies out would save the U.S. government \$45 billion every year."

PolitiFact discovered that Olbermann misstated *both* numbers. They tracked down the original paper written by Sima J. Gandhi, a senior economic policy analyst with the Center for American Progress. "When we read [the paper]," PolitiFact writes, "it sounded to us like Gandhi was saying that 88 percent of all oil and gas subsidies were accomplished through the tax code -- not that 88 percent of *all* federal subsidies went to the oil and gas industry.

"...we contacted Gandhi," PolitiFact adds. "She confirmed our suspicion and pointed us to her original source -- a 2006 paper published by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, a state office. The paper includes a detailed table and says that 'various taxes represented approximately 87.4 percent of federal government subsidies for oil and gas in 2006.' "

Concerning Olbermann's other statement, that "Just cutting the oil and gas subsidies out would save the U.S. government \$45 billion every year." PolitiFact found that it's not \$45 billion every year. It's \$45 billion over 10 years.³ That is more than a considerable difference.

When I pointed this out to a couple of friends well-acquainted with PolitiFact, they reminded me that the Web site rates many of Olbermann's statements as "Mostly True." In fact, of 7 statements made by Olbermann, PolitiFact found that 2 were 'False,' 3 were 'Half True,' and only 2 were rated 'Mostly True.'⁴

"If he's talking to millions on television every night," I asked my friends, "shouldn't *all* his facts be true?"

"Well," they responded, "At least he's not as bad as O'Reilly and Beck."

Ethicist Michael Josephson refers to this popular rationalization as "*The Doctrine of Relative Filth*: I'm not so bad as long as there are others who are worse."

I argued that for "Olbermann, or anyone with a large and potentially influential national presence on television, *credibility* is vital to millions who

are trying to make informed decisions about both policy and people in government. In short, Mr. Olbermann should get his facts straight before he speaks on any issue, and if an error is discovered, he should follow-up with the corrective information.”⁵

Of course the same standard should apply to others on the left. So, I decided to check-in with PolitiFact about those others and here’s what I found.

Arianna Huffington: Of 2 statements checked 2 were rated “Half-True.”⁶

Chris Matthews: Of one statement checked, PolitiFact found it to be “True.”⁷

Rachel Maddow: Of 11 statements checked by PolitiFact, they found 1 “True,” 2 “Mostly True,” 3 “Half-True,” 1 “Barely True,” and 4 “False.”⁸

I found no statements made by liberal Alan Colmes checked by either PolitiFact or FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

It’s important to note that since these commentators have been on the air hundreds of times, the low number of statements checked is not representative of their overall record. To reiterate, PolitiFact’s primary, stated purpose is to “examine statements by members of Congress, the president, cabinet secretaries, lobbyists, people who testify before Congress and anyone else who speaks up in Washington.” Commentators and pundits carry a lower priority with them. However, given the increasing numbers of listeners who appear to rely on opinion-media for information, I hope *both* organizations will spend considerably more time checking their statements.

As host of her own MSNBC show, Rachel Maddow is a Rhodes Scholar described by media analyst Howard Kurtz as “a full-throated liberal.”

“At her best,” Kurtz writes in a Newsweek profile, “Maddow debates ideological opponents with civility and persistence, as she did by pressing then GOP Senate candidate Rand Paul about his criticism of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But for all her eloquence, she can get so wound up ripping Republicans that she sounds like another smug cable partisan.”⁹

Some of that smugness showed up when Maddow took exception to PolitiFact giving her a “False” rating regarding a statement made on her February 17, 2011, show: “Despite what you may have heard about Wisconsin’s finances, the state is on track to have a budget surplus this

year,” she said. “I’m not kidding.”

In that same show, Maddow further claimed that “... [Gov.] Walker and fellow Republicans in the Legislature this year gave away \$140 million in business tax breaks – so if there is a deficit projected of \$137 million, they created it.”

According to PolitiFact, Maddow and others cited a January 31, 2011, memo by Robert Lang, the director of the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau. After re-reading the memo and examining the issue in detail, PolitiFact wrote, “Maddow and the others are wrong.

“The confusion stems from a section in Lang’s memo that – read on its own – does project a \$121 million surplus in the state’s general fund as of June 30, 2011. But the remainder of the routine memo – consider it the fine print,” PolitiFact says, “outlines \$258 million in unpaid bills or expected shortfalls in programs such as Medicaid services for the needy (\$174 million alone), the public defender’s office and corrections. Additionally, the state owes Minnesota \$58.7 million under a discontinued tax reciprocity deal.

“The result, by our math and Lang’s, is the \$137 million shortfall....

“Meanwhile, what about Maddow’s claim... that [Gov.] Walker’s tax-cut bills approved in January are responsible for the \$137 million deficit?” PolitiFact concluded that Lang’s report says that “The tax cuts will cost the state a projected \$140 million in tax revenue – but not until the *next* two-year budget, from July 2011 to June 2013. The cuts are not even in effect yet, so they cannot be part of the current problem.”¹⁰

In a follow-up show (Feb. 24, 2011), Maddow takes PolitiFact to the woodshed because she *did*, in fact, say that Wisconsin would have a \$137 million shortfall.

I went to the Maddow site and reviewed her (Feb. 24) show. In countering PolitiFact’s argument, Maddow rolls the tape of the segment in which she very clearly states the \$137 million shortfall. “PolitiFact you are wrong here on the facts,” she tells her audience, “and you ought to correct it. Putting the word ‘fact’ in your name does not grant you automatic mastery of the facts.”

PolitiFact’s response: “Maddow’s criticism in Thursday’s (Feb. 24, 2011) show used artful editing and told an incomplete story. At issue is whether we checked the right factual claim. We examined her statement that Wisconsin ‘is on track to have a budget surplus this year.’ But she maintains that in the

same segment, she made clear that she knew the state had a shortfall.

"We chose to examine her surplus claim because we had requests from many readers and it was the main focus at the beginning of her segment. It went on for nearly a minute. Her later statement about the shortfall was very brief and her main point seemed to be that the shortfall was created by \$140 million in tax breaks for businesses. Still, we acknowledged in our article that she made that point." ¹¹

When I watched her February 17, 2011 show, it is Maddow's vigorous, declarative opening statement that captures most people's attention, mine included: "I am here to report that there is nothing *wrong* in the state of Wisconsin. Wisconsin is fine. Wisconsin is great!"

While Maddow does acknowledge the budget shortfall, her opening statement is clearly misleading. Further, FactCheck.org states in its first bullet point on the Wisconsin budget issue, that "The state is not on track to end this fiscal year with 'a slight surplus.' It is facing a \$137 million deficit this fiscal year and a \$3.6 billion deficit in the next two-year budget cycle." ¹²

Wisconsin's budget is neither "fine" nor "great," and Maddow should have made it clear as to the true facts at the top of that segment instead of suggesting otherwise.

Misleading statements to garner instant attention, even if you offer the factual statement later, are confusing to an audience that just wants the facts about an issue, not clever word-play. That confusion was borne out by the reality that both PolitiFact and FactCheck received numerous e-mails from individuals who, after hearing contradictory information, just wanted to know the truth.

Whether the opinion comes from the left, right or center, those broadcasting their views to millions have an ethical responsibility to ensure that their information is not only factually correct, but offered in a clear, unambiguous manner. When in error, they have a responsibility to their listeners to make complete and prompt corrections.

Further, all opinion media need to moderate the tone of their discourse. MSNBC's Chris Matthews took a *huge* fall off the civility wagon on his (Mar. 2, 2011) show in speaking about Republican and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who may possibly run for president. Watching video of Gingrich, Matthews says, "...he looks like a car bomber. He looks like a car bomber. Clarence, he looks like a car bomber. He's got that crazy

Mephistophelian grin of his. He looks like he loves torturing. Look at the guy! I mean this, this is not the face of a president.”¹³

Clearly, this is about more than moving toward civility. It’s about a genuine shift from reckless accusations, misinformation, and provocative personal attacks to a more responsible, reasoned and respectful debate.

At a time of true national crisis, however, one political commentator stepped forward to acknowledge his own responsibility even as he called for meaningful change in the way he and his colleagues do business.

**The obscure we see eventually.
The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.**

– Edward R. Murrow

The day after Arizona's Congressional Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 18 others were shot by a gunman in Tucson, the front page of The New York Times carried the story, *Bloodshed Puts New Focus on Vitriol in Politics*.¹ A Washington Post story was more specific, *After Giffords Tragedy, Fingers Point to the Media Model of Confrontation*.² The story carried a portion of Keith Olbermann's own pointed analysis from his MSNBC *Countdown* broadcast on the day of the shooting.

"Staring earnestly into the camera," The Post writes, "[Olbermann] blamed Sarah Palin's rhetoric, saying that if she did not 'repudiate her own part, however tangential, in amplifying violence and violent imagery in American politics, she must be dismissed from politics.' He argued that Glenn Beck 'obsesses nearly as strangely' about the gold standard as the alleged gunman, Jared Loughner, and accused Bill O'Reilly of using violent imagery. Olbermann, who chooses a nightly 'Worst Person in the World,' apologized for his own extremism, like the time he said something that 'sounded,' by his own admission, like a call for physical violence against Hillary Clinton." ³

While Olbermann has certainly been overheated at times, taking responsibility for his own "extremism" in what has become a ruthless circus of *Us against Them* is rare among commentators. However, what Keith Olbermann said next on his program was even more significant.

"This morning in Arizona, this time of the ever-escalating, borderline-ecstatic invocation of violence in fact or in fantasy in our political discourse, has closed.

"It is essential tonight not to demand revenge, but to demand justice; to insist not upon payback against those politicians and commentators who have so irresponsibly brought us to this time of domestic terrorism, but to work to change the minds of them and their supporters - or if those minds tonight are too closed, or if those minds tonight are too unmoved, or if those minds tonight are too triumphant, to make sure by peaceful means that those politicians and commentators and supporters have no further place in our system of government.

"...tonight," Olbermann declared, "we stand at one of the clichéd crossroads of American history.

"Violence, or the threat of violence, has no place in our Democracy, and I apologize for and repudiate any act or anything in my past that may have even inadvertently encouraged violence. Because for whatever else each of us may be, we all are Americans." ⁴

At the beginning of this inquiry I wrote that along with my ethical audit of Beck, Coulter and Limbaugh, I was looking to answer five questions.

1. Does the public listen to these individuals for news, analysis, opinion, or is it all just entertainment?

The raw data from the survey suggests that most people view the three as entertainers. However, more complete analysis by Jamie O'Boyle makes clear that "The audience sees these politically-focused [individuals] primarily as analysis and commentary, followed by news."

In December 2010, Rush Limbaugh welcomes a guest to his program.

RUSH: Janice, Grand Junction, Colorado, welcome to open-line Friday.

JANICE: Merry Christmas, and thank you Rush for keeping us informed.⁵

Janice and millions like her, rely on Limbaugh to keep them "informed." The same has been said of Beck. While Ann Coulter does not have as regular a presence on radio and television as Beck or Limbaugh, she appears to frequent the Fox channel more often than any other network. But take a closer look at the bottom of your TV screen the next time you're watching Glenn Beck. It doesn't read, *Fox Entertainment*. It reads, *Fox News*. Except news is *not* what they're selling. Beck, Coulter, and Limbaugh are selling fear, doubt, and cynicism because *that's* what sells and in hard times they sell *BIG*.

2. How reliable is the information that comes from each of them?

From a factual standpoint, Ann Coulter is light-seconds ahead of both Limbaugh and Beck. In the four facts checked by PolitiFact.com, Coulter's scorecard stands at 2 "Half-truths," 1 "Barely True," and 1 "False." ⁶

By contrast, of 21 Glenn Beck statements checked, PolitiFact found: 2 "True," 1 "Mostly True," 4 "Half True," 4 "Barely True," 6 "False" and 4 achieved the most egregious rating of "*Pants-on-Fire*" false. ⁷

And as I pointed out earlier, of the 12 statements checked by PolitiFact, Rush Limbaugh sits at 1 "Mostly True," 2 "Half True," 3 "Barely True," 3

"False," and 3 "*Pants-on-Fire*" false.⁸

Janice of Grand Junction just may want to reconsider the information she relies on from "America's Truth Detector."⁹

3. How much responsibility do they demonstrate regarding the content and tone of the information they broadcast?

On his August 30, 1993 radio program, Rush Limbaugh said, "I do not lie on this program. And I do not make things up for the advancement of my cause. And if I find that I have been mistaken or am in error, then I proclaim it generally at the top of – beginning of – a program, or as loudly as I can."

Clearly the facts demonstrate otherwise as I noted earlier when Limbaugh failed to correct his earlier statement which minimized the effects of the BP oil spill in light of later analysis that has proven otherwise. But here's another exercise: Google, "Rush Limbaugh apologizes" and what do you get? I found that nine out of the top eleven links point to others apologizing to Rush. Only *one* talks about Limbaugh apologizing to Obama for a remark he made during the presidential campaign when he compared the Senator to *Curious George* and later admitted that he did not know that the cartoon character was a monkey.¹⁰

I did the same for both Coulter and Beck. Of the three, Glenn Beck is the only one with links to apologies the Fox host has made.¹¹ The fact that he's made more than a few apologies for his errors seems to support his own quote at the beginning of his chapter: "If you take what I say as gospel, you're an idiot."¹²

4. Why do some listeners regard many of their statements as truth even when the facts say otherwise?

As previously discussed, Newsweek writer Sharon Begley and political scientist Brendan Nyhan call *confirmation bias* the unconscious driver of behavior. "This is [the] principal reason," Cultural Studies Analyst Jamie O'Boyle wrote, "why people don't recall that commentators have given them information that was proven to be false. Their unconscious brain simply diminished its importance in favor of some other bit of information, and even the little that did get through faded rapidly from memory."

When you add the fact that the country continues to struggle with what most have called the greatest economic decline since the Great Depression, fear and unreason for many have become a default setting triggering much

of the anger and cynicism. Remember Walter Lippmann's observation after the '29 market crash? "A demoralized people is one in which the individual has become isolated. He trusts nobody and nothing, not even himself. He believes nothing, except the worst of everybody and everything. He sees only confusion in himself and conspiracies in other men." ¹³

5. Do they ever cross the line of reasoned commentary, and if so when does it become destructive to society?

In a 2006 report by NBC reporter Mike Taibbi entitled, *Where's the Civility in Political Discourse?*, Ann Coulter came under fire for her comments about 9/11 widows.

"Coulter says she believes everything she says and writes, but has she gone too far?" Taibbi asks.

"It's the ugliness of the charge that she's making and the ugliness of the words she's using that are drawing attention to her, but it's almost like she's a figure in a circus and you say, 'Oh my God, can you believe that?' says former White House adviser David Gergen." ¹⁴

After the recent shootings in Tucson, only Rush Limbaugh could take a call for civility and turn it into his own self-important moment to denounce and dismiss common sense.

"You have to understand what a call for civility is," Limbaugh insists. "It's censorship. Civility means we shut up.... Civility does not mean that we tone it down. Civility does not mean that we act polite. Civility does not mean that we do an NPR impression.... Civility means censorship of the right." ¹⁵

In January 2011, the New York Times reported that Glenn Beck's national attention on an author has resulted in death threats to that individual.

"Frances Fox Piven," the Times wrote, a City University of New York professor, has been a primary character in Mr. Beck's warnings about a progressive take-down of America. Ms. Piven, Mr. Beck says, is responsible for a plan to 'intentionally collapse our economic system.'

"One such threat, published as an anonymous comment on *The Blaze*, [A Web site operated by Beck] read, 'Somebody tell Frances I have 5000 rounds ready and I'll give my life to take our freedom back.' That comment and others that were direct threats were later deleted, but other comments remain that charge her with treasonous behavior."

In a letter to Fox News, "The Center for Constitutional Rights said, 'We are vigorous defenders of the First Amendment. However, there comes a point when constant intentional repetition of provocative, incendiary, emotional misinformation and falsehoods about a person can put that person in actual physical danger of a violent response.' Mr. Beck is at that point, they said."

16

While both Beck and Limbaugh consistently defend their rhetoric, Ann Coulter enjoys the reaction she gets from "colorful commentary" that habitually crosses the line: "...raghead talks tough, raghead faces consequences," "Take a camel," and "faggot."

In a March 2010 commentary on my Web site (ethicsstupid.com) on rights and responsibilities, I wrote, "The level to which anger-driven passion has risen in recent days has become yet another example of individuals who feel that their right to challenge any issue allows them to act in ways that are appallingly irresponsible."

In that same March commentary, I said, "Too many people have chosen to not only ignore common sense but common decency. How can we claim to be 'the land of the free' when individuals declare that their right to free speech includes disrespectfully calling a black congressman 'n****r'? Where is the exercise of responsibility for '...the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances' when protesters curse and spit on another?"

"In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Holocaust survivor and author Viktor Frankl recommended that 'the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast should be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.' His idea was that 'Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility.' " 17

We need a call to responsibility and civility now!

Cards on the Table

There abides in this country a deep and at times, desperate cynicism born of a poisonous influence by those who purport to speak as patriots. They are, in fact, unpatriotic. When they use words of fear and hate, they are reckless and irresponsible. When they equate Nazi imagery to politicians and policies with which they disagree, they are contemptible. When they adamantly defend broadcasting words and images of hate and fear to millions who listen and perhaps believe, they're dangerous.

"Liberty," Tocqueville wrote, "cannot be established without morality, or morality without faith." ¹

When Limbaugh, Coulter, and Beck use personal attacks in their opinions, they demonstrate a lack of faith not only in the principles of America but in the spirit of the American people themselves.

"I am a firm believer in the people," Lincoln said. "If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." Facing a country deeply divided, on the brink of civil war, he implored, "We must not be enemies," and pleaded his countrymen to consider "the better angels of our nature."

Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh have been shown to misrepresent or ignore the facts too many times, and Ann Coulter's persistent ad hominem attacks challenge Lincoln's appeal to our "better angels." To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the philosophy of these three is of failure, their creed of fear and a gospel of hate, its inherent virtue is the equal sharing of misery. ²

In some ways, they're like the crazed Tucson shooter whose singular mission was to destroy someone with whom he fervently disagreed. The mission of Coulter, Limbaugh, and Beck would seem to be to destroy America's faith, hope, and spirit through fear, hate, and unreason.

Of course, Ann Coulter might interpret this as, "You're asking me to stop speaking, stop writing your columns, stop writing your books." Rush Limbaugh would cry "censorship of the right!" And Glenn Beck might say... well, Beck probably wouldn't say anything. He'd have a senior vice president at Fox News speak for him.

All three are fond of citing the Constitution and Bill of Rights, but these documents, however imperfect, are living examples of honor, respect, and responsibility – three ethical values they regularly neglect in their words and

their tone.

We can do better.

"Outrage is easy, cheap and oversold," Mario Cuomo wrote in 1996. "The nation needs less anger and more thoughtful reflection, less shouting and more listening, less dissembling and more honesty." ³

First, we can create a safe environment where we can disagree but in an atmosphere of rational debate. We can have a nationally televised town hall meeting with a panel consisting of political media. That panel can include Coulter, Limbaugh, and Beck, along with Rachel Maddow, Alan Colmes, and Keith Olbermann, as well as journalists facing an audience of citizens prepared with questions regarding issues of responsibility and respect in political discourse. That meeting can also include listening to each one put forth his or her own solutions to reduce the anger and hate in national speech.

Second, we can take a closer look at our own civic duty. Too many of us have become unwitting bystanders in what amounts to an assassination of hope and reason. Too many of us sit, like Chauncey Gardner, the Peter Sellers character in *Being There*, and watch and believe everything we see and hear because it's on TV or radio.

We can do better.

Fear cannot take the place of duty, and unreason is no substitute for critical thought. When it comes to making decisions about the issues and individuals that affect us all, we can do our homework; check the facts and the source of those facts.

Third, we can demand more professionalism from those who have been granted the privilege of speaking to millions over public airwaves. And when they broadcast hate, those individuals along with those who hire and sponsor their programs can be held accountable.

In addressing himself and his colleagues after the Tucson tragedy, Keith Olbermann declared, "Violence or the threat of violence has no place in our Democracy...."

We can do better.

Hate has no place in our Democracy. Willful incivility has no place in our Democracy. Demagoguery has no place in our Democracy.

The only way to have a healthy democracy is through education. Relentless cynicism is not education and is morally destructive to society. We don't need reckless partisan rhetoric. We need the kind of "principled pragmatism [and] optimism" practiced by Ronald Reagan, as scholar Richard Norton Smith explains. "That Reagan told us we were capable of great things did not make him exceptional. That he made us believe it testifies to [his] enduring impact...." ⁴

We can return to that belief again.

Democracy may indeed be messy, as analyst Jamie O'Boyle points out, but it need not preclude civility and decency. Although Limbaugh, Coulter, and Beck are not journalists, their influence reaches millions, and as such they should observe those journalistic standards of integrity, honesty, respect, and responsibility advanced by ethicist Michael Josephson.

"There is a growing hatred in the country. We must be better than what we've allowed ourselves to become. We must get the poison of hatred out of us, no matter what anyone may say or do; no matter what anyone smears or lies or throws our way or to any American's way... We must defend those that we disagree with but are honest and have integrity... There's a lot we can disagree on but our values and our principles can unite us." ⁵

Know who said that? Glenn Beck.

I challenge Mr. Beck to live up to those words. I challenge Ann Coulter to work in a positive way to change what she calls "insufferable political debate in this country." I challenge Rush Limbaugh to live up to his manifesto: "I do not lie on this program. And I do not make things up for the advancement of my cause. And if I find that I have been mistaken or am in error then I proclaim it... as loudly as I can."

"The American people are peculiar people. They're guilty of adulation. They make heroes out of sinners and they make saints out of criminals sometimes. And any person who gains prominence, as a football player or as an actor or as a person in the public eye – they're idolized." ⁶

Know who said that one? Charles E. Coughlin.

There will always be populist demagogues who attempt to “manipulate with emotionalism [the] passions and prejudices of the people”⁷ concerning any political or social issue of the day for their own purposes. The difference between then and now is that we’re better than that. We have a moral and civic responsibility to read, to study, to learn, but more importantly, we have a responsibility to *think* about those issues that affect us all.

“So, let us not be blind to our differences,” President Kennedy said in one of his last public addresses, “but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved.”⁸

If the Glenn Becks, Ann Coulters, and Rush Limbaughs of opinion media are unwilling to stand up and stand *for* the best in this country through passionate, yet rational debate, then all of *us* can stand up and tell them, “Your collective 45 minutes is up. It’s time to get a real job!”

We live in an incredible age of information – *literally* at our fingertips. However, as Edward R. Murrow reminds us, “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference. This weapon of [information media] could be useful.”⁹

Coda

In finishing the last chapter a few questions have occurred to me. What would Sister Mary Robert think of this report? How might she grade my effort in terms of her standards?

Based on past performance, I believe that she'd definitely give me an A for *Diligence*. I completed the (self) assigned task; gave it my best effort in both thought and execution; and made sure my bibliography notes were accurate. However, in grading my *Courtesy*, Sister might view my conduct with a more critical eye. In fact, I can imagine that she'd want to meet with me after class to discuss it further.

"While you never swore or took the Lord's name in vain in your descriptions of Miss Coulter, Mr. Limbaugh, and Mr. Beck, James, your lack of courtesy toward these individuals as well as your emotionalism in this composition reflects your own bias in the subject matter. Many of your words do not live up to the standards of our Lord."

Seated uncomfortably before her large, oak desk, I would argue that "In calling out demagogues, Sister, one must sometimes move into dark territories."

"Our Lord found himself in many 'dark territories' and yet maintained his faith. 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,' (Rom. 5:20)."

"Where ignorance, intolerance, and dishonesty abound, Sister, my duty is to call it out.

" 'Be ye kind one to another,' (Eph. 4:32)."

"Yes, Sister, but these folks don't follow the precepts of the Lord. Did He not also say, 'The tongue of the just is as choice silver; the heart of the wicked is little worth,' (Prov. 10:20)?"

Sister Robert smiled, " 'God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean,' (Acts. 10:28). Remember James, 'Before honour is humility,' (Prov. 15:33)."

Clearly, I didn't have a chance in H of winning this one.

While I received straight A's in *Courtesy* throughout that entire first year, I could see that this was about to change. Sister paused as she reflected a moment, then made the following notation under comments: "James is a

diligent student who speaks clearly, listens attentively, and writes well. However, there is much room for improvement in the area of courtesy toward others as he can easily fall prey to self-righteousness which leads to a lack of self-restraint.”

While I contritely admit to falling prey to some self-righteousness as evidenced in some snarky comments and reveal some bias, that bias is born of a primal passion against intolerance, ignorance, and dishonesty and in those who would shamelessly attempt to sway others using those tactics.

On the back of my report card, below my conduct grades, I found the following printed note.

To the Parent:

You have begun the formation of your child’s character. The school will help you to continue to teach good habits. Little will be achieved, however, unless you cooperate in every way that these habits be practiced outside the school, as well as within the school. A good strong character is of far more value to God and the Country than a brilliant, weak one.

The real America is about hope; it’s about optimism, and it’s about striving to live up to the better Angels of our nature in spite of obstacles. When it comes to political commentators, there’s a whole lot of room for improvement, but that improvement can only come when we the people are willing to see that good character habits – trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and civic duty – are practiced by those who carry much influence.

Our Country calls out for good, strong character *now*, more than ever.

About Norman Corwin

Norman Corwin has been called “one of the greatest living writers in the English language and the poet laureate of radio.”

His essays on the media and social issues have been published in books such as *Trivializing America*, and *Holes in a Stained Glass Window*. His screenplay *Lust for Life*, a biography of Vincent Van Gogh, won him an Oscar nomination. His television credits include his 1971 series *Norman Corwin Presents*.

When Franklin Roosevelt wanted a radio program celebrating the 150th anniversary of *The Bill of Rights*, the president called on Corwin to write, produce, and direct it. Finishing the script while returning to Los Angeles by train, Corwin received news that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. At the next stop, he rushed a telegram to the President’s office asking if the show was still on. “Do we even *need* a show like this, at this time?” Corwin asked. Roosevelt’s response: “We need it *now*, more than ever.”

Me, I’m lucky to be considered a friend and colleague – luckier still, to have him write the foreword.

About Jamie O’Boyle

Jamie O’Boyle is Senior Analyst at the Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis, a Philadelphia-based think tank that studies how people in groups make decisions at an unconscious level.

His work on these unconscious drivers of choice such as the mechanics of perception, culture, gender, age stage and context have been applied by clients as diverse as Walt Disney Imagineering, Procter & Gamble, Thomas Jefferson University, DuPont, General Mills, 3M, Helzberg Diamonds, the International Dairy Foods Association, The National Alliance for Musical Theater, Six Flags theme parks, Pfizer pharmaceuticals, and NASA.

He has lectured widely on the unconscious assumptions that drive American decision-making at institutions such as The University of Greenwich (UK), The University of the Americas (Mexico), and Harvard University.

About Jim Lichtman

Jim Lichtman has been writing and speaking on ethics to corporations, associations and organizations since 1995. Feature stories and appearances include USA Today, The Washington Post, the local *Weekend Today Show in New York*, National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition*, NY-1, and CNN's *NewsNight with Aaron Brown*.

The Washington Post called Jim's first book, *The Lone Ranger's Code of the West – An Action-Packed Adventure in Values and Ethics*, "...entertaining and informative." New York Daily News columnist Stanley Crouch called it, "an attempt to ring the bells of ethics and courage once more."

Jim's Op-Ed commentaries have appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, New York Daily News, and New York Times. His regular commentaries can be found at www.ethicsStupid.com and Huffington Post.

His last book, *What Do You Stand For? – Stories About Principles That Matter*, has been used at Hampton University Honors College, Fairfield University and the New Hampshire Technical Institute.

A graduate of The Josephson Institute's *Ethics Corps*, Jim is a member of the National Advisory Board for the *Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion and Public Life* at The University of California at Santa Barbara.

Jim's current assignment is working to rein in just a bit of his self-righteousness.

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