



Why Liberals Find Talk Radio So Threatening

icon illustrations by Geoff Smith

On December 7, 1995, a story in the *New York Times* announced that the Clinton administration would try to sell its Bosnia intervention by putting spokesmen on radio talk shows. "Talk radio is cost free, travel-free and time-efficient, and reaches millions of Americans who do not normally keep *Foreign Affairs* by their bedsides," the article enthused.

An excellent idea, but an unexpected one—for just eight months earlier the president was indicting talk radio as a destructive medium that keeps "some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other," a conclusion the media elite fell over each other to agree with. Talk radio is an evil bane to many liberals. According to their view, Svengalis of the airwaves are beguiling credulous followers with right-wing propaganda, playing on fears and prejudice, generating hostility toward compassionate policies, and making the country virtually ungovernable.

In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, this fear and loathing reached a fevered pitch. Talk radio was "an unindicted co-conspirator in the blast" argued Richard Lacayo of *Time*. Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy are "fomenters of a mood that is fairly described as hateful," said *Washington Post* columnist Jonathan Yardley. "Talk radio is not democracy in action but democracy run amok," insisted NBC reporter Bob Faw. "It's about anger. It's about tearing down," agreed former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ellen Hume. Conservative talk shows are "politically partisan and sometimes racist" clucked Dan Rather.

President Clinton himself charged that talk shows "spread hate. They leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable.... It is time we all stood up and spoke against that kind of reckless speech and behavior." (Backpedaling aides later maintained the president wasn't referring to Limbaugh and colleagues, but rather to extremist shows on shortwave radio.)

Why does the Left loathe talk radio? Is it possible that animus toward this increasingly potent medium says more about the state of liberalism than it does about the nature of the programs? Are call-in forums truly arenas of hate, or just the most recent stage in the evolution of American democracy? And who really makes up the talk radio audience?

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By Don Feder

Talk is the hottest thing on the radio dial. Of the nation's 10,000 stations, approximately 1,000 offer conversation on controversies ranging from sex to politics. Of the syndicated shows, Rush Limbaugh's is far and away the most popular. His daily program, airing on over 660 stations, has an estimated 5 million listeners at any given moment, several times that over the course of a week. That is more than a third of all talk-show listeners nationwide. "What liberals hate most about Rush Limbaugh," observes *Village Voice* columnist Nat Hentoff, "is the size of his audience."

Critics would have us believe that the average listener tunes to Limbaugh or Liddy while clanking along a rural highway in his pickup, gun rack in back, a John Deere cap covering his sloping forehead—the very epitome of a choleric Caucasian guy. Actually, according to a recent survey commissioned by the industry publication *Talk Daily*, nearly half of all adults in the U.S. tune in talk radio at least occasionally. This scientific survey of 3,035 individuals shatters stereotypes about the narrowness of the talk radio audience, finding that most listeners are educated, middle-class, and politically active. (See INDICATORS, page 16.)

Hosts too defy generalities. A 1993 random sampling of 112 talk show hosts by the Times Mirror Center for People and the Press found that many more voted for Clinton (39 percent) than Bush (23 percent) or Perot (18 percent). Prominent liberals like Mario Cuomo, Jim Hightower, and Susan Estrich have their own shows. But those with a liberal bent tend to be much less popular than others. Of the nine most listened-to talkers nationally, only two—Michael Jackson and Tom Leykis—are liberals.

If conservatives dominate talk radio, a series of interviews I conducted with talk masters across the country indicates that it's a broad band of conservatism that goes out over the airwaves. Among the most prominent conservative hosts are African Americans Ken Hamblin, syndicated out of Colorado, and Armstrong Williams, based in Washington D.C. Three of the leading conservative hosts I interviewed are Jewish.

Jerry Williams, the dean of Boston talk radio, might be described as a liberal populist who's as critical of corporate America and Republicans seeking to deregulate the economy as he is of officious bureaucrats and political grifters. Bob Grant, who has New York's top-rated show at WABC, says his defense of Second Amendment rights is principled not personal. "I hate guns," Grant told me. "I don't want one in my house. But I don't want to interfere with my neighbor's right to own a gun." Liberalism was once broadly distinguished by this attitude of "I'll defend to the death your Constitutional rights." David Brudnoy, a 20-year veteran of talk who dominates Boston's nighttime airwaves from WBZ, has two M.A.s and a Ph.D. Conservative on fiscal concerns and libertarian on other matters, last year the well-liked broadcaster announced he has AIDS.

Part of the appeal of talk radio is that unlike the New York-D.C.-L.A. liberalism of network television and newspapers of record, it offers almost every shade and hue of opinion. And it's unfiltered. "It cuts out the middle man," comments G. Gordon Liddy, the nation's second most popular talker. "There are no gatekeepers or spinmeisters. I can communicate directly with the audience, and they with me, and 8 to 10 million people are listening."

Talk radio is the one media forum where ordinary people can actually be heard. Says Brudnoy: "Write a letter to the editor and it takes days to publish, if it's published at all—and then it's often edited. Call a station manager to complain about TV news and get a polite brush-off or a recorded message thanking you for your interest. You can get on most talk shows just by dialing the phone." Oliver North, who's been talking on the airwaves for only a year but is already in the top tier nationwide, notes that "Talk radio is interactive. Listeners know that what they're hearing is authentic." Liddy confesses he can't manage the forum, the way news is often shaped on network broadcasts. "If I hang up on a caller, it's

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Democracy on the Air

"There is something to the nature of talk radio," says former Democratic National Committee chairman David Wilhelm, "which is to tear things down." That pretty much sums up the conventional wisdom about talk radio. In 1993, Rep. Bill Hefner (D-N.C.) accused it of stirring up discontent "to the point where we're not able to govern." Hosts have even been blamed—indirectly, of course—for the Oklahoma City bombing and the series of attempts on President Clinton's life in 1994.

The talk radio audience may indeed be difficult to govern, and they may indeed like to complain. But if you think the medium only gums up the democratic process, you've a rather limited grasp of talk radio's current nature. Take the show hosted by Mike Siegel that runs every afternoon on KVI, Seattle's top-rated talk station. It combines talk's populist fervor with a constructive effort to bring alienated listeners into the public square.

For the last three years, Siegel's show has broadcast live from the state capital each day the state legislature is in session. Usually, this means setting up shop in Olympia for about two months out of 12; in a budget year, like 1995, it can take as many as four. A steady flow of legislators and administrators come on the program to speak directly with their constituents; so do people visiting Olympia to testify for or against pending legislation. Listeners thus have a chance to press their representatives about the issues that matter most to them.

And what do they want to talk about? Some of the most popular topics are the issues common to every state: crime, education, government waste. Others are specific to Washington, like performance audits: Siegel has devoted several shows to the need for a better tool to measure government efficiency, arguing that the legislature should not be trusted to audit itself. Siegel has also spent many of his Olympia shows (and many Seattle-based broadcasts too) looking into the state's ludicrously mismanaged Department of Social and Health Services, particularly its Division of Children and Family

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