

# Rush to Judgment

By Thomas W. Hazlett

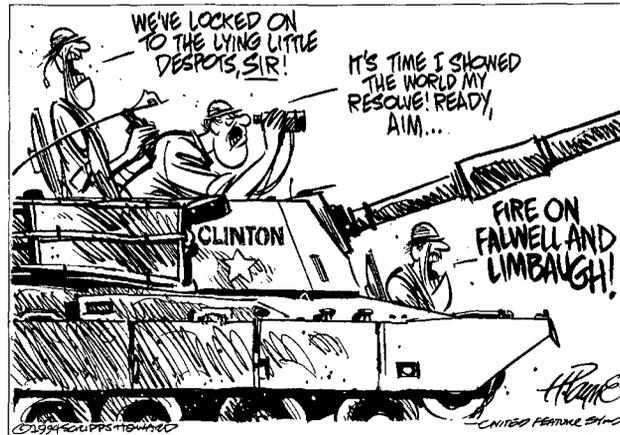
## Limbaugh's secret sauce

**B**Y SOME COINCIDENCE OF nature I moved to Sacramento, California, in the very same month—September 1984—that another American, also fascinated by politics and critical of liberal orthodoxy, did. He was just one-and-a-half years my senior, and we became friends. We enjoyed many chats about life, public policy, politics, economics, and women. I met his family, he met some of mine. And then in 1988 he moved to New York City where he became the most famous political commentator in America: Rush Limbaugh.

It is amusing to read journalists report on a person one knows, all the more so when the reporting is biting, tendentious, and ambitious. It is interesting to actually see both sides of a controversy: Rush is a walking controversy. It is annoying to know someone so famous that a good deal of my mail and telephone traffic is composed of messages from people (from French-Canadian businessmen to congressmen to women seeking courtship) trying to “get some information to Rush.”

Now I see, as reported in *The Washington Post* by Jack Anderson, that the gurus who brought us ClintonCare and a Republican Congress have dedicated themselves to promoting a left-wing Rush. This is a sensational window into the thinking of the Clinton brain trust, a term that has more political than biological significance. In their view, devastating Democratic losses are simply the result of...nasty comments on talk radio.

The rise of Limbaugh is a phenomenal experiment in the consumer economics of broadcast markets. Rush was not plucked out of an Ivy League school and placed at the pinnacle of political debate in America



by the networks, the *Times*, or the *Post*. He dropped out of college only one semester in. He bounced around in a disc jockey's chair for most of the next two decades and was fortunate to grab a chance at a Sacramento talk-radio outlet when he was well into his 30s. It was likely his last chance in show biz.

What propelled Limbaugh? Ratings. Somehow, Rush got tons of people to spin that dial to KFBK, 1530 on the AM dial. But did any national network or syndication snatch him up? Nay. No one would touch him. Too controversial. Too right-wing. Too opinionated. Too...never went to Harvard.

The makeshift distribution chain that put Limbaugh on 55 radio stations in August 1988 was entirely ad hoc—and people tuned in en masse. Now, with 650 stations and 22 million weekly listeners, Limbaugh is the King of Talk. He went on TV in September 1992, and ratings are similarly amazing, as his ragtag syndication pulls in viewer numbers rivaling Jay Leno's—which are backed by the National Broadcasting Corporation.

This is the audience talking, but all the Clinton *wunderkinder* hear is Limbaugh's rant. It haunts them, and they know: If they could just get their own mouthpiece, all their Great Plans would succeed and the people would love them! But liberals

roam talk radio: Michael Jackson of Los Angeles's KABC failed in heavily marketed national syndication by ABC Radio just before Limbaugh's Excellence in Broadcasting launched. Jim Hightower, Gloria Allred, Jerry Brown, and Tom Leykis spit their anti-Republican venom daily. But where are the numbers?

**W**HAT THE WHITE HOUSE does not understand, and will not understand even after I explain it to them, is that the key to Rush's success is the very totem they insist on dragging out to save themselves. It is the liberal media dandies off whom Rush plays, whom he mocks with unending glee and merciless buffoonery. There have been other conservative talk-show hosts. But Rush—each and every time he takes to the air—gives the listener some politics and a bonus: He sticks his finger in a liberal's eye.

He does it not by meanness, as the clueless wine-and-cheese crowd whines. He does it by joyously celebrating the existence of an alternative medium—his parallel universe—where the prevailing pieties of the liberal elite carry no weight whatever. The condescension of the elites is Rush's launch pad. He blasts off at the very moment his show begins, bellowing that his is the “only information super-highway you'll ever need.”

The boastfulness strikes much deeper than the liberals will ever know. When Rush barks that listeners tune only to him, “because I'll tell you everything you need to know, and I'll tell you what to think about it to boot!,” the anguished White House monitors and their electorally challenged minions cry that legions of mindless “dittoheads” are taking their orders from a talk-show lunatic.

HENRY PAYNE

In fact, Limbaugh is sparking a huge reaction by mimicking the very liberals who decry him: This is Rush's impersonation of the all-powerful network news anchorperson, saying out loud what is the subtext in any of the auspiciously introduced and expensively produced national news shows. Their rectitude, their certainty, their values spark Rush's counter-attitude. He's just as cocksure, and he's actually honest about his edge. It is a spoof, and the spoofees don't get it. Ha, ha, ha!

When Rush screams, "I *am* equal time," he is not merely responding to the proponents of the Fairness Doctrine. He is revealing whence he came, out of the belly of the beast. It is against the backdrop of a news media obsessed with the tragedy of American life, fascinated by the do-gooders of government, bent on giving shortshrift to the decency and hope which the American Dream has inspired, that Rush Limbaugh roars. The sanctimony of your typical news story about homelessness, racism, poverty, AIDS, crime, the environment, schools, taxes—the sappy subtext that says, "I, the muck-raking reporter who knows so much more than the complacent uncaring middle-class bigots whom I will soon expose, am here to set this country straight about its priorities"—triggers the wildly enthusiastic response, and the huge numbers for Limbaugh. The Ditto Master explodes the taboo, saying aloud what the liberals whisper between the lines—while expecting those they scorn to remain politely seated.

THE POP CULTURE, WHICH ORDINARY Americans both enjoy and despise, rails against middle-class values. In billboards in Northern California now advertising the excitement of the snowy slopes of the High Sierras, a ski resort pictures various men in before and after shots. Before, they are well groomed and look b-o-r-i-n-g. After, they have long hair, are unshaven, wear really cool shades, and appear to be having the time of their lives. It has become a truism that the hard-working, play-by-the-rules fellow is a sap, and

that his life will ultimately amount to no more than the death of a salesman.

The working man is displaced as society's hero. As Patrick Moynihan has noted, the culture has "defined deviancy down," raising many who make little or no effort to conform to civilized standards to an exalted social status—that of victim. This is offensive to those who see their schools, tax base, neighborhoods, and daily lives made less palatable by such a reordering. And just to polish off that hard-working chump, as Charles Krauthammer alertly chimes in, the culture has also "defined deviancy up," meaning that the middle class is accused of more crimes than ever before. Wife beating is said (erroneously) to skyrocket on Super Bowl Sunday; divorce skirmishes routinely result in child-abuse charges; the business owner is subject to myriad social regulations that—when inevitably crossed—criminalize the act of producing output to be consumed by one's fellow man. Oops! I said, "fellow *man*." Guilty!

The mainstream media dutifully report such "news" to those who work, parent, build, and pay taxes. Dressing up stories with attractive, articulate newspeople and extravagant production values, the old-line news outlets consider the common people incapable of conscious consideration of the underlying subtext. But those who are nagged and scolded for causing homelessness and poverty and a pitifully underfunded government tend to figure out quite a lot, given time.

Rush is middle-class revenge. He speaks their language, harbors their hopes, believes in their values. He tears through CompuServe to pin down those news stories that reveal the wildest excesses of the politically correct, the most abusive hectoring or denigration of middle-class values. He regales his audience with tales featuring average Americans who buck elitist prejudices to do something great in the marketplace where the country's workers live and dream. (Rush's favorite fable: the rise of Rush Limbaugh to fame and fortune.)

When he is bitterly attacked as a maniac, a hatemonger, or a bigot, it raises his

ratings through the roof. Not because he is such things but because he is not, and because his listeners know it. Rush can err factually or philosophically (and we have talked, to good effect, on the former and debated, to good effect, on the latter). But he is not of the lunatic fringe.

Those who place him there are suckered. The litmus test they think they're inflicting is a reverse test which they publicly flunk, oblivious to their score. When the White House bellyaches about Rush's talk-radio forum as mindless, or jokes that he is a racist, the Clintonites signal the marketplace that they, too, are among the enlightened few who know that middle-class attitudes are beyond the pale of decency. This is not exactly where a popularly elected president should strive to be. But it is precisely where Rush Limbaugh flourishes, having the president of the United States as his publicity agent.

Bill's White House geniuses want to create yet another liberal face for Rush to be in. This is a little too generous, given how Bill and Hillary have already boosted Rush's platform several miles higher.

What the Clintonites really need are some slick, arrogant *conservatives*, perhaps as network news anchors—perhaps three or four. They need a public that has been subjected to incessant holier-than-thou lecturing from the Moral Majority or the American Legion or the National Rifle Association. The need to move Pat Robertson from the *700 Club* to *ABC World News Tonight*. Liberals need to become outsiders again. Then they might lob their missiles at the smug and smarmy establishment—and actually hit someone other than themselves.

As his troops march home from the desert, chuckling, Limbaugh excites an esprit de corps in his audience. Now the Clintonites, if they are to regain their edge, must wander on the outs awhile. The administration's first two years seem like a pretty good start. ☛

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# In with the Newt

By Carolyn Lochhead

## The first Republican week

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE Krushchev replaced Stalin, Republicans on January 4 took control of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Capitol seemed transported to a different planet.

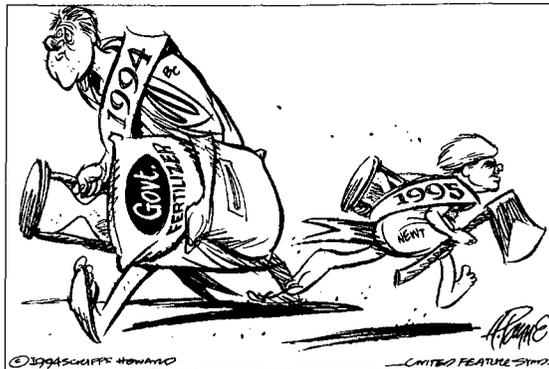
The formerly wretched and scorned ascended to the chairs of the great committees and began dictating free-market agendas once dismissed as ridiculous and unworthy of notice. Their leaders took over the ornate offices of the Capitol itself, like Goths inside the gates of Rome.

The new House majority leader, former economics professor Dick Armey, could be seen standing outside before a bank of television cameras quoting at length from Thomas Sowell.

In the House, Minority Leader Richard Gephardt passed the gavel to Newt Gingrich. Republicans roared with jubilation, and the front page of *The Washington Post* declared, "The Berlin Wall of American politics came tumbling down."

The legislative machinery on Capitol Hill suddenly shifted into reverse. Instead of the Family and Medical Leave Act—the first major bill passed by the previous Congress, requiring employers to grant special time off—Congress took up a measure to stop unfunded federal mandates on state and local governments.

Where last year Washington labored on a health-care program to take over a seventh of the U.S. economy, now it is pushing through the Contract with America, a 10-point blueprint of unapologetic conservatism. Reporters now treat the contract as seriously as they once treated health care, inquiring about regulatory cost-benefit analysis as they once detailed the intricacies of health alliances.



At the House Ways and Means Committee, which oversees taxes and entitlements, free marketeer William Archer took the chair long held by Chicago Democrat Dan Rostenkowski, defeated in November. Archer said he wants to abolish the income tax.

A Senate Banking Committee hearing on financial derivatives, blamed for the Orange County fiscal collapse, would normally have launched major regulatory backlash. Instead, the panel declared no need for further regulation. "Don't blame financial markets for the bad judgment on the part of participants in that market," said Sen. Phil Gramm, another former economics professor.

Over in the Senate Government Affairs Committee, Chairman William Roth employed tactics long honed by Democrats at committee hearings: lining up heaps of favorable witnesses first and leaving an opponent or two speaking to empty hearing rooms in the late afternoon.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici vowed at a press conference to abolish 100 federal programs. "Why do you all look so gloomy?" Domenici asked reporters. "We're going to have a revolution in your thinking too."

Republican governors met with the new leadership and announced plans for an unprecedented transfer of welfare programs, including AFDC cash assistance, back to the states. Reporters mobbed the

Republican governors afterwards, smelling power like range cattle smell water, and scrambling over chairs to catch their comments. Three years ago, Michigan's John Engler and Massachusetts's William Weld addressed a half-empty room at a tiny Cato Institute conference that passed completely unnoticed by the outside world.

California's Chris Cox, who once couldn't get his name into a newspaper, was profiled on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* as chairman of the House GOP Policy Committee. He has been reading David Stockman's book about why the Reagan Revolution failed. "There is a lesson to be learned," Cox said, "and that is don't be David Stockman. Don't think that you must accomplish everything instantly and that if you fail, God intended it to be the way it is."

"The federal government is 200 years old, and every single part of it was initially built for a reason," Cox said. "We can't simply assume it away. It's going to be hard work to take it apart as necessary, and leave in place what Americans truly desire in the 21st century."

The debate will no doubt be long and bloody, but what is most striking is how its terms have shifted. November's electoral quake shook Washington's foundation. Perhaps it will soon dissolve into the cynical posturing that usually prevails. But one could not help sensing that first week that the end of nearly half a century of Democratic rule might bring with it the end of the New Deal era of soft socialism. Who, after all, would have thought that the libertarian Cato Institute would ever be one of Washington's hottest think tanks? ♦

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