

## An unexpected voice of reason in Rivera

Brian Chasnoff

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Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and telejournalist Geraldo Rivera have long been cut from the same cloth, both straddling the line between politics and entertainment while actually only selling sensationalism.

Patrick has ascended to the most powerful office in Texas, but decades earlier he was reading scores with a cougar in his lap and having cheerleaders paint his body blue as a sports anchor in Houston. Around the same time, Rivera was embarking on a career of embarrassing himself by blasting into Al Capone's "vaults" only to discover a pile of dirt and a few empty bottles. ("It's '20s junk. Definitely '20s junk," he confirmed on live television, coughing in the dust.)

These days, both men would seem comfortable on Fox News, where their right-wing commentary has currency. Alas, a rift has opened between them over Patrick's on-air denunciation of "the CNNs, the MSNBCs, most of the print media in this country and the Democrats" as "accomplices" in the death of Mollie Tibbetts, a 20-year-old Iowa college student who police say was killed by an undocumented immigrant.

Rivera countered by calling Patrick a "bottom-feeding politician" who is "stereotyping 11 million people in our country here without documentation."

Now, a debate is in the offing; Rivera has accepted a challenge by Patrick to face off, presumably on Fox.

To which I say: Go Geraldo!

Yes, this is mostly a distraction. As President Donald Trump's legal jeopardy deepens, Fox has turned to the Tibbetts story to foster a competing sense of conservative outrage. It's an old trick:

using anecdotes of individual crimes to demonize an entire population and scare voters to the right.

This particular sideshow is compelling, though, because it features the usual sensationalism colliding with an unexpected voice of reason: Rivera's.

I've found his commentary in the past contemptible, at times bordering on racist. In 2012, for instance, when the country was roiled by the shooting of Trayvon Martin, Rivera said the slain teenager was partially responsible for his own death because he was wearing a hoodie.

His defense of undocumented immigrants, however, is sound.

"They care for our babies," Rivera argued on Fox. "They mow our lawns. They wash our dishes. They pick our fruit. They pack our meat. They process our poultry. And to characterize that entire group of people as all of them murderers ..."

Rivera then mentioned Christopher Watts, 33, a bearded Caucasian accused of killing his wife and two children in Colorado.

"Do we then say millennials with beards are a threat to society because of this case?" he asked, adding, "I know that most of the Fox audience disagrees with me. But I'm begging you to have compassion and not brand this entire population by the deeds of this one person."

Rivera need not beg. These are not the "vaults" of Al Capone. This isn't a mystery. The facts are clear.

Using data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, a recent report by the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute found the criminal conviction and arrest rates for immigrants in Texas in 2015 were "well below" those of native-born Americans.

In particular, the homicide conviction rate for undocumented immigrants in the state was 16 percent below that of native-born Americans. For all criminal convictions in Texas that year, undocumented immigrants had a criminal conviction rate 50 percent below that of native-born Americans.

People have been shouting these figures for years, though, to no avail. That's because the emotional argument is more immediate: A woman is dead, and her killer should not have been here.

The kink is that one's immigration status simply does not predict whether he will commit a crime. Keeping Americans safe by funding a border wall, say, is a confusion of causality.

Patrick will ignore this, of course. To the lieutenant governor, each murder by an undocumented immigrant is proof of the population's peril. It's a correlation he's bound to make in his clash with Rivera.

He might as well debate with a cougar in his lap. No matter how specious his argument, Patrick will know it's sensational enough that people won't look away.

Rivera's challenge, should he and Patrick clash, will be to blast through those walls and show viewers there's nothing there. Just some junk.

He's done it before.