



The Right's Reign on the Air Waves

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In late 1961, a Miami chiropractor named Jerome Harold became outraged when he learned that his local grocery stores were selling ham imported from Poland. The country was still firmly under Communist control, but a new Kennedy administration policy had opened up trade with certain Eastern Bloc nations, hoping the exchange of goods would pry the nations away from the influence of the USSR. And so the United States had recently inked a deal to send iron ore to Poland in return for ham from the country's farmers.

A few months later the boycott caught the attention of one Carl McIntire, a fundamentalist radio broadcaster whose show was syndicated on hundreds of stations around the country. McIntire praised Harold and his project, and within weeks there were dozens of local boycotts springing up from St. Augustine to Seattle. Suburban housewives hosted "boycott card parties" where they wrote cards with slogans like "Always Buy Your Communist Products at Super Giant" or "This Has Been Inspected for Your Table by a Real Good Communist," then went together to the grocery stores to scatter hundreds of cards on all the shelves. By the end of the year, two dozen cities had passed ordinances prohibiting the sale of Polish ham, and companies including Walgreens, Sears Roebuck, and Woolworth's had agreed not to stock it. Sales of the ham fell by more than \$40 million in today's money, and when the trade deal came up for revision in October, Kennedy eliminated the Polish ham provision.

The Polish ham boycott was an early dinner date in the courtship between talk radio and the conservative movement. Over the course of 50 years, that courtship led to a long and faithful marriage, and that marriage in turn helped a set of far-right politicians seize control of all three branches of government. Taking advantage of talk radio's ability to reach disaffected people in all corners of the country, right-wing broadcasters spurred their listeners to political action, bringing millions of new voters into the fold of the Republican Party and pushing that party further to the right at the same time.

Two new books on radio history attempt to explain just why this marriage has been so durable and so effective—Paul Matzko's *The Radio Right*, which covers the 1940s through the 1960s,

and Brian Rosenwald's *Talk Radio's America*, which covers the 1980s through the present. The two books have very different conceptions of how and why that marriage endured, but they both demonstrate that broadcasters like McIntire and Rush Limbaugh were just as important to building the Republican Party as deified political figures like George Wallace, William Buckley, or Pat Buchanan. Indeed, far from being a mere tool of the Republican Party, talk radio is revealed in these new books as the dominant explanation for that party's continued existence, an essential precondition of the far-right's cultural dominance today.

For the first few decades of its existence, radio was not a conservative medium: Progressive figures like Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin used broadcasts to foment support for labor rights and railroad nationalization, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt recorded weekly "fireside chats" to shore up support for the New Deal. It was only with the rise of television as the premier broadcast medium in the 1950s that radio became fertile ground for conservatives. When investors, advertisers, and politicians threw all their resources into TV, they left behind a radio landscape mostly populated by independent stations that could not afford to be picky about what they broadcast.

Soon a horde of right-wing broadcasters rushed into that landscape: McIntire and his fellow preacher Billy James Hargis, the oil magnate H.L. Hunt, the Catholic scholar Clarence Manion, and the candy manufacturer Robert Welch. These broadcasters bought up air time for cheap from hundreds of stations, cobbling together de facto syndication networks: The reach of McIntire's Twentieth Century Reformation Hour grew from less than 25 stations in 1958 to almost 500 stations in 1964, by which time his daily audience well exceeded 20 million listeners; the overall station reach of conservative broadcasters increased by more than 1300 percent over the same period, reaching citizens who otherwise weren't being engaged by politicians or the media.

This new generation of conservative stations (Matzko calls it an "activist network") had a wide variety of styles, but they all toed basically the same line: criticism of the Kennedy administration, fear mongering about moral decline, and paranoia about Communist influence in the United States. From the beginning their appeal to listeners was founded on an antipathy toward what we now call the mainstream media, with a sense that mass culture and public education were leading the country down the wrong path: "Once Mr. Average American gets a chance to find out what is happening to his country," said broadcaster Clarence Manion, "he becomes a dedicated Conservative."

More importantly, these broadcasters placed enormous emphasis on political mobilization against evils like Communist imports and sex education, well before the Republican Party itself had come around to the idea of that motivation. The Polish ham boycott was far from the only example of a broadcaster like McIntire urging voters in suburbs and rural areas to get out of their houses and take action, advocating for instance to repeal the federal income tax (a measure eventually ratified by nine states) and to head off the liberalization of school curricula.

Perhaps most provocative is Matzko's claim that these broadcasters helped lay the foundation for what would become the Southern Strategy, easing the transition of Dixiecrats into the

Republican party: McIntire, a lifelong Republican from New Jersey, was the most listened-to broadcaster in the South at a time when Democrats like Strom Thurmond still controlled the region's politics. The segregation issue wasn't a top priority for McIntire, but since he opposed the liberal clergy, and the liberal clergy opposed segregation, he came around to what Matzko calls an "instrumental" opposition to integration. When Governor Orval Faubus refused to integrate Little Rock High School, McIntire sent him a letter congratulating him on his "stand for freedom and the constitutional rights of our states."

But Matzko is far less interested in the rise of the "Radio Right" than he is in its fall: He devotes most of the book to exploring the Kennedy administration's response to the new broadcasters, which he styles as "the most intense episode of government censorship of the past half century." Curiously enough, this censorship effort began with Walter Reuther, the head of the United Automobile Workers union: After the Polish ham affair Reuther sent Kennedy a 16-page memo recommending he go on the offensive against McIntire and Hargis. Using remarkably prescient language, Reuther urges Kennedy "to contain the radical right from further expansion and in the long run to reduce it to its historic role of the impotent lunatic fringe." When the broadcasters got wind of the memo, they cast Reuther as a "ruthless, reckless, lawless labor goon," but Kennedy took all his suggestions. First the administration contracted the ominously named "Group Research Inc." to conduct surveillance and research into the Radio Right, then Kennedy directly pushed the IRS to conduct selective audits of conservative radio stations, stripping them of tax-exempt status on the grounds that they engaged in overtly political activity.

Most significantly, though, the Kennedy administration leaned on the Federal Communications Commission in 1963 to expand the Fairness Doctrine so that if a right-wing broadcaster like McIntire attacked Kennedy or the Democrats, any station that hosted him would be legally obligated to give those parties time to respond on air—for free. The DNC and its associated organizations then bombarded hundreds of stations with response-time requests, and since most of the stations were operating on shoestring budgets, dropping broadcasters like McIntire and Hargis quickly became a financial necessity. Kennedy died in 1963, but the plan had already been set in motion, and Lyndon Johnson maintained it: The station reach of Hunt and McIntire's programs plummeted in the years after the FCC changed the rules, and McIntire went out of business by 1973. (He held a "funeral" for the station where pallbearers dressed in judges' wigs placed a prop radio antenna in a coffin labeled "Freedom of Speech.")

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Notwithstanding Matzko's potential bias in approaching the subject—he has worked for the Cato Institute and is a guest editor at Libertarianism.org—the facts of the matter are damning. Kennedy's response to the radio right does seem more or less to fit the definition of a targeted censorship campaign. More than that, though, it goes a long way toward explaining why the far right's influence on national politics waned in the following decades. The conventional wisdom is that the temporary waning of the far-right movement was caused by Barry Goldwater's resounding defeat in 1964, but another possible explanation was that extreme

conservatives had lost the main vehicle for their ideas. With a great deal of effort, Kennedy and his successors had snuffed it out—but only for a while.

Rosenwald's *Talk Radio's America* tells a story that will be far more familiar to the average reader, in part because we are still living through it. He picks up in the late 1980s, a few decades after Matzko leaves off, but the event that begins his narrative is not the fall of the Soviet Union or the end of the Reagan era. Rather, it's the abandonment of the Fairness Doctrine, the law that had allowed the Kennedy administration to suppress the radio right: Amid the deregulatory fever of the Reagan years, the FCC waived the restriction on political activity, allowing for more overt criticism and support of political candidates than had been possible in decades.

As in McIntire's heyday, the talk radio industry was in dire straits: nearly all music was broadcast on higher-quality FM stations, which had relegated talk programs to a "radio ghetto" on the AM band. Most of the shows were snooze-worthy infotainment programs broadcast in the wee hours of the night in order to fulfill stations' obligation to air public-interest material. But no sooner did Congress repeal the Fairness Doctrine than another tribune filled the void left by the anti-Communist broadcasters of a previous generation. After spending more than a decade doing local radio programming under the airname "Bachelor Jeff," a small-time DJ named Rush Limbaugh secured his first nationally syndicated news program in July 1988, just months after Congress opened up the medium to openly political content.

Like the moralizing broadcasters of the 1960s, Limbaugh's managers took advantage of the industry's low ebb, allowing smaller stations to air the show for free in exchange for a few minutes of advertising time. But a moralizer Limbaugh was not: He may have believed that "there are no better ten things to teach people ... than the Ten Commandments," but his show was about as far from morally enriching as one can imagine. He would drown out liberal guests with screaming sound effects he called "caller abortions," introduce news about openly gay congressman Barney Frank with the song "My Boy Lollipop," and pepper news updates with machine-gun blasts and explosions. As one executive put it, he was "always looking to turn somebody's sacred cow into some delicious hamburgers and a couple of steaks." Needless to say, listeners loved it. Within two years he had 5 million listeners on hundreds of stations, not to mention dozens of imitators.

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Limbaugh once said that people tune into talk radio for "three things: entertainment, entertainment, and entertainment," but from the start he acted as the de facto coxswain for a new generation of conservative politicians. Tapping into a broad swath of voters who had remained alienated and dissatisfied even in the wake of the *Pax Reagana*, he cast current events as a high-stakes contest between those who wanted to save America and those who wanted to destroy it—the gays, the peaceniks, the ACLU, you name it. In his early years this ardent commitment to conservative causes sometimes brought him into tension with the Republican establishment, as, for instance, when he boosted Pat Buchanan's primary challenge against George H.W. Bush in 1992, but once Bill Clinton was elected, all bets were off.

Heading into the 1994 midterms, he amplified dozens of congressional races and ballot initiatives. When Republicans recaptured the House of Representatives that year for the first time in a generation, they declared Limbaugh an honorary member of their freshman class.

Rosenwald takes great pains throughout the book to argue that the alliance between conservative politicians and hosts like Limbaugh was a matter of historical accident, that “there was no Republican plot to create talk radio,” that the alliance between the medium and the message represented less a faithful marriage than an uneasy strategic bond. The goal of conservative hosts “was to make money, and certainly they never took marching orders from Republicans,” he writes, arguing that “ideology was the lesser factor in [Limbaugh’s] success” and even suggesting (rather half-heartedly) that he would have been just as successful if he had been a liberal. As evidence that the “marriage was a complicated one from the start” he cites Limbaugh’s long-standing habit of slandering moderate Republicans and supporting far-right primary challengers; Limbaugh needed to maintain an independent image, he says, since “what mattered most was the quality of his show and his relationship with his audience.”

Even if Matzko’s research did not undermine this conception of Limbaugh’s success as an historical accident, Rosenwald’s own narrative undermines it as well, since it less than five years elapsed between the launch of Limbaugh’s show and the *National Review* cover labeling him “The Leader of the Opposition.” Limbaugh himself laid out the stakes as early as 1992, when he said that after Bill Clinton’s victory there was “going to be a huge battle for the soul of the Republican Party,” led by ardent conservatives. He won this battle quickly and decisively, wielding his listeners’ outrage to hold Republicans to an obstructionist line, encouraging his audience to bombard senators’ phone lines if the senators wavered from their opposition to certain bills or judicial nominations.

In Clinton’s second term, Limbaugh pushed impeachment, in Bush’s first term he pushed the war, and in Bush’s second term he tanked immigration reform, using his platform to unseat old guard RINOs every step of the way. By the time Obama was elected, he and fellow talk-radio broadcasters like Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Glenn Beck were just a few nodes in a web of media outlets created in his mold. Roger Ailes produced Limbaugh’s spinoff TV show before founding Fox, and Andrew Breitbart had his conservative awakening while listening to Limbaugh in the car.

Rosenwald is right that talk radio hosts like Limbaugh never took orders from Newt Gingrich or Dubya. If anything, it was the other way around. But arguing that there was no Republican Party plot to create talk radio is akin to arguing there was no automobile industry plot to invent gasoline: The party as presently constituted was not just boosted by Limbaugh, it was invented by him. The reach of his radio program allowed him to foment conservative anger on a scale that McIntire and Hunt could only have dreamed of, and to leverage that anger into a conservative takeover of the U.S. government. The xenophobic, anti-elitist sentiment that he instrumentalized had of course existed before him, but it did not become the predominant influence in the Republican Party until Limbaugh marshaled it into an electoral weapon, beating the ploughshares into swords. Republicans did not always win, even with his support, but they never won without it.

The lingering question in both *The Radio Right* and *Talk Radio's America* is whether there is something essentially conservative about the radio medium, whether the airwaves were always destined to be filled with far-right ideas. Neither author sees the Republican-radio marriage as having been inevitable, in part because the social function of the radio changed dramatically over the years after the rise of television and the Internet; there are always counterexamples, too, not least of which is the persistent popularity among liberals of National Public Radio.

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Nevertheless there is something telling about libertarian radio host Dean Boortz's description of his ideal listener: "I'm in the bathroom with these people ... I'm in bed with them, taking showers, eating breakfast. This personal relationship gets built up. They think I'm talking to them one on one." Uninterested by conventional politics and alienated by a changing culture, such a listener would gravitate day by day to Boortz or Limbaugh's way of thinking while on his daily commute. There was a similar kind of bond between McIntire and the suburban housewives Matzko describes, the otherwise apolitical women who took up arms against the Communist menace after hearing about it on the radio one day while cleaning the house. The low-cost, lightweight nature of the medium, as well as its technological capacity for following one into the car and onto the job, seem to have allowed it to penetrate the consciousness of Americans whom politicians could not or did not reach by traditional means. In the words of a Democratic senator from Wyoming who diagnosed the threat of the radio right in the 1960s, "it would be difficult to exaggerate how the concentration of these programs in limited population areas ultimately captures the public mind."

In theory, of course, radio could have rallied many members of this same population to the support of progressive causes, but McIntire and Limbaugh alike always positioned themselves as outsiders, giving their listeners the impression that they were joining in the fight against a dominant hegemony. In politics as in sports, there are few things more compelling than a good underdog narrative, and the listening base of talk radio has always been inclined to see itself as a societal underdog, that inclination later hardening into Donald Trump's appeal to the "forgotten man and woman" in the 2016 election. Even with their champion in the White House and their acolytes cluttering the courts, Limbaugh's devotees will still see themselves as on the outside looking in.

More than being emotionally compelling, though, an underdog narrative like Limbaugh's is an advantageous framework for anyone who wishes to inspire political action. The mainstream media may have a liberal slant, but hegemonic outlets like CNN and *The New York Times* do not encourage their viewers and readers to identify an enemy, much less to go out and do battle with them. Terry Gross may appeal to liberals, but Rush Limbaugh created conservatives. He gave millions of people a story to tell themselves, and that story produced votes. Those votes produced representatives, and those representatives produced a reign of power that it will take the work of decades to dislodge and unravel. This is a coup that is worthy of the name "populism," inasmuch as it has converted raw will into political power. It is a project that the left should look upon not with disgust, but with envy.

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