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[Jewish World Review](#) Oct. 27, 2010 / 19 Mar-Cheshvan, 5771

NPR fires Juan Williams for sin of independence

By Nat Hentoff

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | As a regular listener to National Public Radio for decades -- and having occasionally been interviewed on its programs -- I was stunned when NPR's top brass summarily fired Juan Williams on the phone for being "inconsistent with our editorial standards and practices" and having "undermined his credibility as a news analyst with NPR."



But it is National Public Radio's credibility that has been seriously undermined!

Unfairly, this action by management could affect the credibility of many NPR regulars who, like Juan Williams, engage in factual reporting leading to news analysis, and subsequent opinions. This is the core of responsible journalism that led James Madison to specifically include the press among the five freedoms of the First Amendment.

I await, as of this writing, comments about this firing from some of Juan Williams' former NPR colleagues. Their speaking out publicly will bolster their own credibility among NPR listeners.

The initial reason given by NPR's commanders for Williams' termination was when he said during an appearance on Bill O'Reilly's Fox News program that when he gets on a plane, seeing "people who are in Muslim garb ... identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims, I get worried." (Ignored by his former bosses was Williams' warning to O'Reilly about stereotyping all Muslims as "extremists.") However, as NPR CEO Vivian Schiller soon admitted, Juan was not fired for what he first said to O'Reilly. She tried to cite his unforgivable failings by using awkward semantic trickery. Schiller proclaimed NPR's Humpty Dumpty-like ethical standards -- he had violated -- for NPR's news analysts who, unlike "commentators or columnists ... may not take personal public positions on controversial issues."

Huh? During his years at NPR, the late, legendary and independent Daniel Schorr -- a longtime model for me and many other journalists -- took positions, on NPR and in his writing, on controversial issues. How could he not? And he described himself as a news analyst.

Finally, Schiller revealed why Juan Williams was really shown the door without even, as Williams points out, a face-to-face dismissal. She couldn't bear looking at him? Williams' cardinal sin, she says, were his appearances, while at NPR and also on Fox News:

"Unfortunately," she added, after frequent warnings from his Fox bosses, Juan's "comments on Fox violated our standards and offended many in doing so."

Oh my goodness, he offended listeners! NPR's CEO is committing her partially publicly financed network to political correctness! If I were on the NPR staff, I might now be picketing the building.

It is a measure of NPR managers' guarded parochialism that a news analyst on their staff can be fired for what he or she says in another public place. Still on staff there, but frequently pressured to cease her appearances on Fox News, is senior Fox political analyst Mara Liasson. She is as independent as Juan Williams.

In view of many independent NPR listeners' angry reactions to Juan Williams' disappearance from that network, Liasson's job may be safe for now. But like Williams, who now has a three-year, nearly \$2 million contract for appearances and a column on Fox News, Liasson won't have any problem finding another gig. CNN could surely use her.

Very belatedly, NPR's strictures on the free speech of its reporters as they analyze the news reminds me I must give credit to the late prominent exerciser of free speech, Jerry Falwell. Having criticized him in print, I was surprised one day when his office relayed an invitation from him to write for his "Moral Majority" publication.

Since I aim to write for as many readers of differing views as I can reach, I immediately agreed -- with the condition that he call me if he changed anything I wrote for him. He said he would, and I was not censored. Also, I was once on Fox's Bill O'Reilly program. I learned he welcomes dissent.

With sad predictability, the firing of free-speecher Juan Williams is leading to a firestorm of retaliation aimed at ending funding for all speech, free and otherwise, on NPR and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). House Minority Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia, a rising star of the Republican Party, says "he would add ending taxpayer funding of public broad casting to his web site, on which visitors are asked to decide which federal programs are to be cut" (sunherald.com, Oct. 22).

Now there's a democratic way to cut off specific free-speech sources! He is far from alone among those who would oppose NPR's censorship by greatly diminishing NPR.

Also calling for reducing (at least) NPR funding are Newt Gingrich and Mike Huckabee (JewishWorldReview.com, Oct. 23), along with Michelle Malkin, Andrew Breitbart and, at full volume, Sarah Palin! (huffingtonpost.com, Oct. 23). She who claims to embody free speech wants to limit it.

Joining the guillotiners of free speech is Republican Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina. In March of last year, I praised DeMint for joining Florida Republican Sen. John Thune's amendment to stop the FCC (Federal Communications) from going along with Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin and other Democrats to revive the falsely named "fairness doctrine" censoring free speech on airwaves.

Yet here is DeMint (BurlingtonFreePress.com, Oct. 23) complaining that, "Since 2001, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which funds programming for National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, has received nearly \$4 billion in taxpayer money" (and is now getting \$430 million for the 2011 fiscal year). "These programs should be able to find a way to stand on their own." DeMint in a nutshell: Cut their funding!

Next week: NPR accepts an \$18 million grant from billionaire George Soros' Open Society Foundations to build local reporting around the nation while the same Soros -- a dedicated enemy of Fox News -- donates \$1 million to the liberal Media Matters "to intensify its efforts to hold the Fox host Glenn Beck and others on the cable news channel accountable for their reporting" (New York Times, Oct. 21).

Now that Juan Williams is a liberated news analyst at Fox News, maybe he'll be made accountable for his independent views again -- and thrown out once more.