Rush Limbaugh: Talking Back

Conservatism’s media superweapon.

by Terry Eastland

The Dollar Rent-A-Car shuttle is carrying me and my family across the non-fruited plain of the Dallas–Fort Worth Airport. The driver spends much of his day in this bus, which of course comes with a radio, and in Dallas you can get the show on KUII 1190. It’s on three hours a day, five days a week, on over five hundred stations coast to coast, and my driver is one of the 12 million who listen to him daily.

“Yes, I listen to Rush,” he says. “And the scary thing is, I agree with him.”

Scary? Perhaps my driver has been intimidated by what Rush Limbaugh calls the “dominant media culture,” for only a hidebound liberal could be afraid of what Limbaugh has to say. Limbaugh is a political conservative for whom no hyphen is necessary: neither neo- nor paleo- nor anything else. In this he is much like his hero, Ronald Reagan. What’s more, he has a rock-’n’-roll energy that busts the conventional image of the conservative as unfunny and out of it. Or maybe it’s Limbaugh’s shameless braggadocio, his apologetic admission that he is right only “97.9 percent of the time.” Or maybe it’s the weird, even tasteless stuff that sometimes finds its way onto the show—such as Limbaugh’s recent discussion with several callers about lamb and pig castration.

Four years after it started, “The Rush Limbaugh Show” enjoys the largest audience of any radio talk show since the advent of television. No longer is it possible to say, as Limbaugh does, that he is just “a radio guy.” When ABC’s “Nightline” did a program last February on environmentalism’s declining appeal, it chose to pit against Sen. Al Gore not another politician but Rush H. Limbaugh III. “What I intended by [having

Terry Eastland, our regular Presswatch columnist, is resident fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and author of the new book Energy in the Executive: The Case for the Strong Presidency (The Free Press).
Limbaugh is pursued by media of every stripe, and by conservatives eager to hitch their wagons to his rising star in an age of ostensible conservative decline.

So it is that, when the news at noon is over and 12:06 p.m. has arrived, Limbaugh begins:

Greetings, conversationalists across the fruited plain, this is Rush Limbaugh, the most dangerous man in America, with the largest hypothalamus in North America, serving humanity simply by opening my mouth, destined for my own wing in the Museum of Broadcasting, executing everything I do flawlessly with zero mistakes, doing this show with half my brain tied behind my back just to make it fair because I have talent on loan from . . . God. Rush Limbaugh. A man. A legend. A way of life.

I have entered Two Penn Plaza here in Manhattan and taken the elevator high above Madison Square Garden to a floor that is home to WABC 770, where the scourge of liberals holds forth weekdays from noon to three. I wait in the small reception room, but not long. The door opens and before me appears a red-haired guy in khaki shorts and a T-shirt. My eyes are drawn to his footwear, a pair of Chuck Taylor’s Converse, black low-tops. Immediately I know I am nowhere near the straight-faced solemnity of the “dominant media culture.” Kit Carson, chief of (a very small) staff for the show—and whose real name is Kit, just as his brother’s is Johnny—leads me to the control room from which I can observe the world’s most dangerous man.

I see a large face framed by a headset that covers the ears as thoroughly as a pair of earmuffs. Whatever else may be happening in America, this man is having a rollicking good
time. Whenever music rolls, he drums his fingers on the table before him, as though he were still a DJ. At eye level is the microphone, and at arm’s length, on a stand, are various papers. Limbaugh pulls at this bit of paper and then that, commenting in a Midwestern accent that has a touch of Harry Caray in it on what’s in the news or in the faxes that pour into his office. The voice must be listened to, for not only is there no telling what will be said next, there is not even any figuring how it might be said, and all the while an experienced (even for a day) listener has the expectation that a huge laugh, in which he can join, is about to break out. Throughout his commentary Limbaugh snaps his sheets of paper between his thumbs and forefingers, as loudly as he can. The sound zips through the mike: it is background music of sorts for the “Excellence in Broadcasting Network,” which has one and only one show.

“I see stuff,” Limbaugh later tells me, “and say ‘Wow! What a good show I’m going to have today!’ ” He had seen some good stuff that morning, just days after Bill Clinton took on Sister Souljah. Limbaugh expresses his strong agreement with Clinton and excoriates black leaders, like Jesse Jackson, who want him to apologize. What she said “can’t stand the test of reason or morality,” says Limbaugh. “I’m appalled by it.” Today, as always, Limbaugh does with Jesse Jackson what cannot be done in print and what would not come across so effectively on television. He refers to him as The Reverend Jackson, pausing between “The” and “Reverend,” and “Reverend” and “Jackson,” drawing out the first syllable of “Reverend,” and pronouncing the three words in a near whisper because, as Limbaugh explains, this is a man no one dares reproach. Limbaugh draws a cartoon, in effect. The Clinton-Souljah-Jackson topic leads Limbaugh on to urban matters: he goes after Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” album, explores the rioting in Chicago that occurred the night the Bulls won their NBA Championship, and speaks his mind (as he has since late April) about the rioting in Los Angeles and the apologetic political responses to it.

Limbaugh has occasion to praise Oliver North and Dan Quayle, to laud talk shows (“You people in the dominant media culture don’t understand why candidates go on talk shows. . . . This is a wonderful development”), to knock the New York Times for an anti-Quayle story, and to criticize Ross Perot’s bid for the presidency. Every mention of Perot’s name triggers a playing of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again.”

Today, as on other days, there is an “Animal Rights Update” and, per usual, a few calls: one about racial hatred, another about a First Amendment case, another about Oliver North’s appearance on CNBC (Limbaugh: “He’s very cool, he’s mastered the medium”), another from a woman who identifies herself as a “feminazi liberal” but nonetheless tells “Rush” (every caller calls him that), “I love you any- way.” Limbaugh exits to commercials with “bump” music, usually rock ‘n’ roll. Today, at one point, Limbaugh signals his crew to use the “Cultural Bump.” A while ago some Limbaugh fan wrote and sung lyrics to a Puccini tune; the operatic composition includes a description of Limbaugh as “the conservative voice of freedom heard throughout all America.” It is a stitch to hear this sung, and Carson and company, who have heard it many times before, are laughing along with Limbaugh.

Thus went my day at the Excellence in Broadcasting Network. While every show begins with a bouncy bass lead-in (from “My City Was Gone” by Chrissie Hynde and the Pretenders), thereafter the show is whatever Limbaugh decides to make it. Typically, he comments on the events of the day, a job that finds him ridiculing liberals. These include the “arts-and-croissant crowd,” “environmentalist wackos,” the “feminazis,” the “homeless advocates,” and the “multiculturalists.”

Limbaugh also issues “updates” on various political or cultural topics, introduced with music and sound effects. The Animal Rights Update is preceded by Andy Williams singing “Born Free” with sounds of gunfire and explosions and animal screams mixed in; the Homeless Update uses “Ain’t Got No Home,” a tune cut in the fifties by Clarence “Frogman” Henry. Limbaugh also features “Feminist Updates,” “Sexual Harassment Updates,” and “Anita Hill Updates,” which are variations on the same theme. (The Hill updates are introduced by the Guess Who’s “She’s Come Undone.”) Limbaugh also has “Condom Updates,” which are introduced by the Fifth Dimension’s “(Would You Like to Ride in) My Beautiful Balloon?” Limbaugh takes on his liberal targets through other devices, such as mock commercials. He has several such ads for “bungee condoms”; on one, an announcer indicates that these devices are “now available in the handy 18-pack Kennedy Saturday Night Special.”

Ted Kennedy is perhaps Limbaugh’s favorite target. To introduce his “Ted Kennedy Update,” Limbaugh has made “The Wanderer” by Dion into “The Philanderer,” sung by a Ted Kennedy impersonator:

I’m the type of guy who likes to roam around,
I’m never in one place, I roam from town to town.
And when I find myself falling for some girl,
I walk right to that car of mine, I take her for a whirl.
’Cause I’m a Kennedy, yes, I’m Ted Kennedy,
I sleep around, around, around, around, around.

This is Rush Limbaugh, the most dangerous man in America, with the largest hypothalamus in North America, serving humanity simply by opening my mouth . . . doing this show with half my brain tied behind my back to make it fair . . .”
Nor does Limbaugh have fun just with political figures. He routinely goes after many in Hollywood, including "enviro" Ted Danson of "Cheers" and Linda Bloodworth-Thomason of "Designing Women" (and Redesigning Bill Clinton—she produced the tape of Clinton’s “life story” used at the Democratic Convention).

While the Rush Limbaugh Show includes calls from listeners, it’s not caller-driven; the callers serve merely to make Limbaugh bigger (so to speak) and better to his audience. Not that they have to agree with him, but they have to be passionate or interesting enough to retain the show’s nationwide audience; “The Rush Limbaugh Show,” Limbaugh freely admits, is a business.

Bo Snerdley (an alias) screens the calls; it’s his job to keep out the crazies and the bores—both sure-fire audience losers. On some days, only a few callers get through. For example, the plaintiff in Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council got on air on June 29, the very day the Supreme Court decided his property rights case in his favor. Lucas said the 7-2 ruling was a “tremendously good decision” and was pleased that the “same bunch of people” (the environmentalists Limbaugh so often rails against) had lost.

Limbaugh treats his callers politely and with respect. Combat radio is not for him. “Many hosts are agitators,” says Richard Harris, another Limbaugh listener who worked nine years for National Public Radio and is now with “Nightline.” “They try to get people riled up. Limbaugh doesn’t. He has the ability to get to the core of an issue without having an incendiary discussion with angry callers. You can have an honest debate with him, and you know he won’t have his thumb perched on the cut-off button.”

It is, of course, impossible to tell someone about “The Rush Limbaugh Show.” Given the specialized vocabulary he uses—“feminazi,” the “fruited plain,” “General Dinkins” (the New York Mayor), “Rio Linda, California” (a dreary neighborhood near Sacramento that he employs to describe a place most people wouldn’t want to be in)—Limbaugh advises that it takes six weeks of the show before a listener can “comprehend its nuances.” The showman and business-man ever, Limbaugh recommends lengthy exposure to “EIB” (Excellence in Broadcasting), which he defines as “an airborne phenomenon spread by casual contact that’s addictive yet harmless to the health” and for which millions of Americans have tested “positive.”

As James C. Roberts wrote last year in the American Enterprise, the rise of talk radio is related to the emergence of information as one of the central ingredients in popular culture. Begun a half century ago in New York, talk radio was local in orientation until the late 1970s—about when Limbaugh left radio for the Royals. Satellite technology helped create national talk radio, as did deregulation of the telephone industry, in the early 1980s, which made it economical for people to call up a Limbaugh on an 800 number. With the erosion of AM radio audiences, local stations could more easily share the costs of a national show than produce their own. And, with the nation more and more wired into national issues, local audiences were “nationalized”: what interested the nation interested them. Helping the rise of both local and national talk radio was one of talk radio’s important differences from the prestige press and the television networks: citizens could actually talk to the big cheese.

While all this helps explain why there is a “Rush Limbaugh Show,” it doesn’t begin to account for its popularity. At least as important as Limbaugh’s unique radio persona is the increasingly widespread dissatisfaction with the “dominant media culture,” a development that is related to the huge interest in Ross Perot as a presidential candidate.

Last year the Kettering Foundation reported that more and more Americans feel they have been dislodged “from their rightful place in American democracy” not only by politicians and lobbyists but also by “people in the media.” To sell himself, Perot used radio and television talk shows that by their nature allowed him to speak, unedited and unfiltered, to the people. He was outside the system, including the big media. Limbaugh also stands outside the big media, indeed against it. And because surveys routinely

The American Spectator  September 1992  25
show that most of the news media, like most of Hollywood, are well to the left of the American people, Limbaugh resonates with an audience that necessarily is to the right of the media.

To be sure, Limbaugh was highly critical of Perot’s candidacy. He thought it born in deceit and said the Dallas billionaire did not understand our political system. He correctly knocked Perot’s electronic town hall as being at odds with the teachings of the Federalist. While Limbaugh, like Perot, uses a distinctly populist medium and refuses to surrender his right to speak to “learned experts,” he is not one to endorse pure democracy or claim to speak for the people.

If Limbaugh had been a shoot off the liberal media stock, it’s doubtful his audience would be so large. What he has done is fill a political-cultural void created by the departure of Ronald Reagan, the last figure to speak unapologetically for American conservatism. What then does he think of the argument that conservatism—to borrow a phrase from a well-known magazine editor—is cracking up?

“Bob [Tyrrell] is writing from the perspective of the conservative movement, and there are problems there,” says Limbaugh. “For that matter, there may be some in the conservative movement who don’t regard me as part of it. But out in the country there are lots of people who don’t know about all the arguments conservative writers have but who are still basically conservative. And out there, we’re winning.”

For years conservatives ruminated about how they might challenge what Tyrrell calls the one-party media. Buy a newspaper, a network. Suddenly if improbably, and even to Limbaugh’s surprise—“I didn’t have a sense of being a pioneer,” he says—there is another way. The EIB.

Restaurants in cities where the show is heard have set aside “Rush Rooms,” in which people who want to hear Rush while they eat lunch can do just that. Not long ago I found myself in O’Charley’s, on Six Forks Road in Raleigh, North Carolina, hard by a K-Mart the length of a football stadium. O’Charley’s Rush Room is in the bar area. Tennis racquets adorn the walls, along with signs for Miller and Budweiser (but why no Coors, the beer of the right?), and a schedule for the Winston Cup stock-car races. Televisions—one small, the other the size of a Volkswagen—are tuned in to ESPN. O’Charley’s Express Menu (ready in ten minutes) includes hamburgers, a BLT club, and a bunch of salads.

“We get lots of suits in here,” says the bartender, “and lots of blue-collars.” Yesterday the place was full, but today it’s just me and a couple of blue-collars. I am putting away some fish and chips while the guy on the barstool beside me eats fried chicken. “I love his show,” he tells me. “He’s down to earth. He says what he thinks. He speaks the truth.”

So says this man in a blue workshirt (and collar) who works at the nearby Exxon. His name, spelled out on a patch above his right pocket, is Adam. Adam wears a blue Exxon cap and sports a ponytail. Adam means, literally, the first man. Rush, who believes in God and in creation, should like it that I’m talking to a ponytailed Adam who fully embraces his show.

I’m told that some folks in Raleigh aren’t so happy with Rush. This O’Charley’s used to set aside one of its main rooms as its Rush Room. People objected and wanted O’Charley’s to end it. Rush Room supporters heard about the objectors and told O’Charley’s to keep it. The restaurant decided to relocate to the bar area. The person keeping track of tables tells me that about seven or eight people a day come in asking to hear Rush. I ask the nature of the objections. “That he’s sexist and racist.”

Par for the course for Limbaugh, those objections, and they have been expressed by such as Gloria Allred, a feminist activist who uses Hitler in discussing Limbaugh. (Although she confesses to listening to Limbaugh “in the privacy of my car”; Limbaugh should be pleased with this exercise of her right of privacy.)

Limbaugh’s arguments, whether stated propositionally or conveyed through jokes or lyrics or mock commercials, are based upon certain conservative premises: that all human life has been created by God and is sacred; that God placed man in dominion over nature, including the animals, who do not, strictly speaking, have rights; that no healthy society can dispense with belief in God or the public accommodation of religious practices; that there is a moral law, grounded in religion, by which man’s behavior must ultimately be judged; that there are differences in nature between men and women that are relevant to the way in which we should order at least some things—such as our military—in public life; that society should not guarantee equal outcomes but equal opportunity; that governments are instituted to protect the rights of individuals; and that individuals flourish best when government is limited and families are strong.

Limbaugh focuses on three causes in particular—environmentalism, animal rights activism, and feminism—because he believes that underlying all three are anti-capitalism, secular humanism, and socialism. He does make distinctions: for example, the environmentalist wackos, whom he excoriates are not to be confused with serious “ecology-minded people,” whom he applauds. But Limbaugh paints with a broad brush, and his targets are in ready supply: all those who seek to eliminate natural differences between man and nature, be-
tween men and women, and even between man and God.

Limbaugh may seem an unlikely conservative warrior. Twice divorced with no children, he is now single, and though he believes in God, he does not go to church. But Limbaugh disdains the "lifestyle liberalism" of many in the media (and Hollywood and politics), who live on the basis of the proposition that there is no higher authority than the individual, no higher end for man (which is to say for the human person) than his constant self-creation. Limbaugh has come to his cultural conservatism not through intellect but naturally, having been formed by a Missouri culture much sterner than what prevails in many places today. It’s no wonder that Limbaugh has gone to bat repeatedly on behalf of Dan Quayle in his war against Murphy Brown and others, even suspending his no-guests-in-the-studio rule to allow Quayle to share his microphone for half an hour one afternoon in July.

Limbaugh battles the absurd by being absurd, as he puts it. Because he thinks it absurd that public schools now distribute condoms, Limbaugh produces his mock commercials about "bungee condoms." He thus does not avoid the word "condoms," as might those cultural conservatives who are put off by Limbaugh’s occasional crudity and not always PG language. Limbaugh opposes the excrescences of modernity by being excrescently modern—another irony.

What Limbaugh’s impact upon the nation will be is unclear. Limbaugh believes liberalism is dying. I’m not so sure. Some of the more extreme aspects of political liberalism have died. But cultural liberalism has deep roots in ideologies dating from the last century, is difficult to address through most of the ordinary instruments of our politics, and will need exposure to something much stronger than EIB if it is to be constrained.

And bear in mind James Q. Wilson’s observation (made in his seminal 1980 Commentary piece, “Reagan and the Republican Revival”) that in periods of broad cultural change, such as we have been witnessing since the 1960s, “the forces of tradition have ultimately lost.” The battle over the nation’s future will continue to take place in the classroom, from kindergarten through graduate school, and conservatives have yet to mount an effective takeover of a major university. Still, Limbaugh has become a major point of resistance to liberalism in the popular culture, and the ultimate effect of his daily cartooning may be to delegitimize for a huge segment of Americans those whom the dominant media have lionized. Whether this subversive work will lead to a more sensible national discourse is an open question.

Limbaugh could have an impact on elections. Conservatives are down to about 170 reasons why George Bush should be re-elected, the same 170 reasons why Bill Clinton should not be; those 170 reasons are the judges the next President will have the chance to name. This is why Limbaugh, whose cultural conservatism has made him especially attentive to the role of the judiciary, will probably support Bush (so long as it is Bush-Quayle).

Might the card-carrying Republican eventually cross over into politics? Limbaugh says he’s not interested in becoming a politician, that he knows and respects the enormous difference between politics and talk radio. Harder to accept is his contention that he does not seek political influence. “I have no cause, no political agenda,” he says. “I just want to be the best radio guy I can be. If I succeed, it will be because I do a good show.” But his show will not be a good show unless Limbaugh is being himself, and that means he will be talking politics, and who ever seriously talked about politics without hoping to win the argument?

Perhaps Limbaugh’s most important impact will be on his fellow conservatives. Evans and Novak reported in May that “a longtime Bush backer” had advised the President that “to save himself this election year, he would do well to imitate the style of Rush Limbaugh.” It’s not so much that Bush and others should emulate Limbaugh’s style as partake of his hearty optimism. There’s nothing wrong with being right at least 97.9 percent of the time.