



Talk Radio's Hate Mongers

by Shekhar Deshpande

Sensible reading is hard to find, especially in these days of media obsession with the banal and the stupid. Knee-hitting episodes in the figure skating and the philandering Buttafuoco returning from the prison occupy national consciousness. There is reason to worry about reasoned discourse in this culture.

With the bestsellers list making up the national character, one has to work hard to find good, intelligent and stimulating reading. Two interesting pieces concerning minority culture are worth looking at in their entirety, although they are still about the mainstream trash gutting the minds of millions. One way or another, Bob Grant, Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh get to you.

Patricia J. Williams's article in March/April 1994 issue of Ms. Magazine on "Hate Radio: Why we need to tune in to Limbaugh and Stern," is one of the better critiques of these two super-human mouthpieces of America. Williams, incidentally, is a brilliant writer working today. One has to be thankful she is participating in public discourse and not limiting herself to the musty academic writing which has great insights, but

rarely accessible to most people. Her book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Harvard University Press) is simply the most important diagnosis of racism in the United States in recent years.

Stern and Limbaugh are hugely successful. It is hard to remember anyone making money like that on radio. Stern is known even to his distracters as "funny." His admirers gloat over him and shell out money for his tapes and book, partially because he is an "equal opportunity offender." Since he offends everybody, from James Taylor and Alfonse D'Amato to Jackie Mason and Latoya Jackson, he must be good at heart. Such offense is done in the name of entertainment and therefore (so goes the argument) most listeners consider it innocuous. The great wise people of the Federal Communications Commission have decided to heat up things by pursuing senseless fines against him and his employers, thus enhancing the process of martyrdom that Stern himself has kept open. Stern is apparently entering the New York Governor's race. The permanent tease about whether he is serious or not will keep tantalizing the public until Stern has made his name a household commodity, like the doormats that are decorative and dirty at once.

Limbaugh is another story. His gift is making politics entertaining. Mix Right wing politics with rock-and-roll and you get three hours of rants that pretend to be rational and sensible but move without any decency of ethics known in the Western civilization. Limbaugh has used radio to make a political program popular in ways that would put Father Coughlin and Joseph Goebbels to shame. He repeats innuendoes and rumors with the minimal provisos, reserves all sarcasm and venom for people on the left of him, which is the farthest reach of your right hand. Limbaugh hawks books, and simplistic ideas that are symptomatic of the intellectual level of the people he apparently admires as being too 'complex' and 'smart.'

These two bright torchbearers of the civilization are often used as examples of the fact that the First Amendment ("greatest gift since the sunlight") works.

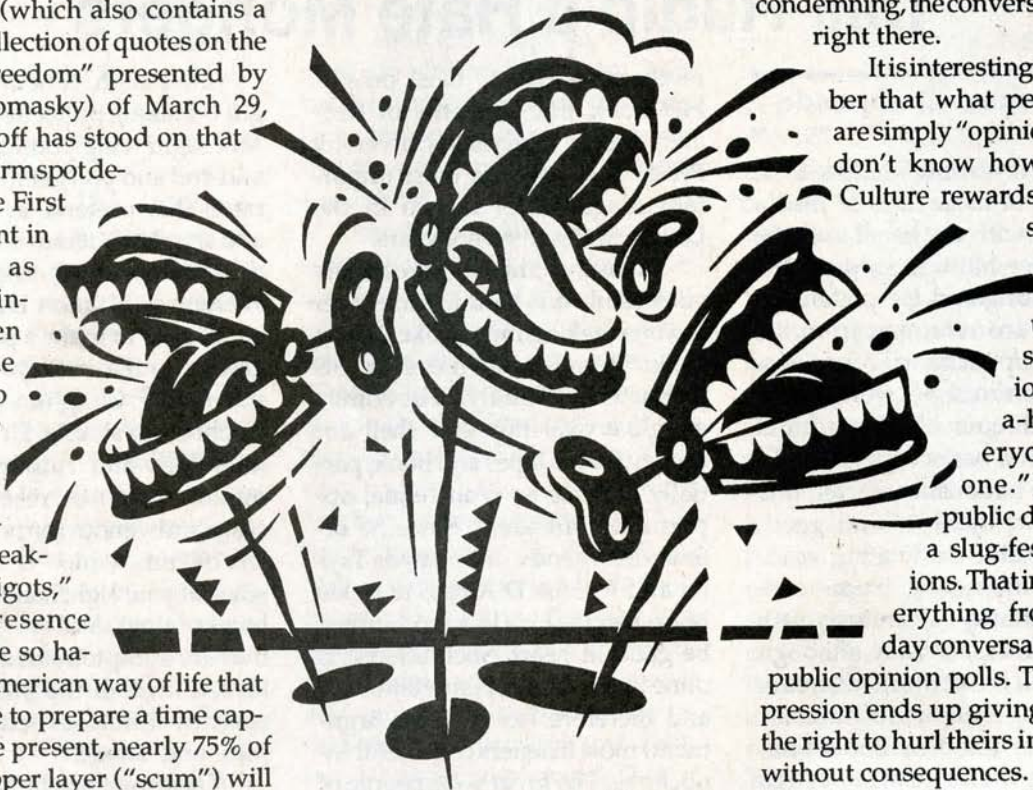
Williams asks us to consider that defense. This sugarcoating in fact indicates less the comfort in free expression and more a barometer of how and what the mainstream white male America (which constitutes most of the audience for these two wizards of airwaves) is thinking. Gone are the days of suppression and censorship, she

says. Fascism (authority that strives on racism) has learnt its lesson. It works by encouragement of democratic principles and by worship of market dynamics. If everything works as it is supposed to, we the people will have only ourselves to blame. Celebrate while you can although some voices louder than yours define the free expression by drowning your own.

That brings us to the second article by Nat Hentoff in *The Village Voice* (which also contains a surprise collection of quotes on the idea of "freedom" presented by Michael Tomasky) of March 29, 1994. Hentoff has stood on that lonely but firm spot defending the First Amendment in practice as well as principle, often making the effort to look for people like him long but precious. Speaking on "bigots," whose presence has become so habitual to American way of life that if one were to prepare a time capsule for the present, nearly 75% of it in the upper layer ("scum") will be occupied by these designated cultural dignitaries.

Bob Grant, who took local WABC radio to new heights of ratings (along with his co-traveler, Limbaugh), spews bigotry in the name of "free and open, two-way conversation." He begins his programs with a fluffy tribute to free exchange of ideas and views. So long as these views are closer to Grant's own, which are indicative of the Right Wing unconscious, everything works fine. But if you are immigrant, or naturalized citi-

zen with an accent, African American with an accent or a free mind, or anywhere left of Grant himself, he will cook your goose on radio, right before his admiring audience. Thanks to Clarence Thomas for reminding us what lynching was, Grant gives a demonstration of that, except in a quick and certain manner. You can take home some of his bigoted epitaphs, if not new attributes of what the Right would really like to say about you.



As Williams says and Hentoff hints, the popularity of these talk-show hosts suggests that on radio one hears what people are thinking of but are afraid to say it. In fact, that is precisely the defense of these hate-mongers. They have the freedom to say what is on people's minds and that is what makes America great! Hentoff warns how Grant leads the parade of hatred in the name of free expression.

And what is the nature of public conversation in this country? People cannot talk of religion or

politics partially because their one dimensional views aren't worth the breath that makes them expressible. But more importantly, there is no conversation in public anyway, let alone open and free kind. As soon as you cross the threshold of challenging someone else's "opinion," either you are blessed with having the right to differ (and say what you want) or condemned with some ideological taint which is different from theirs. Patronizing or condemning, the conversation ends right there.

It is interesting to remember that what people have are simply "opinions." They don't know how or why.

Culture rewards just possessing one (a friend of mine used to say, "Opinions are like a-holes, everyone has one."). So the public discourse is a slug-fest of opinions. That includes everything from everyday conversations to the

public opinion polls. The free expression ends up giving everyone the right to hurl theirs into the ring without consequences.

In this desolate and desperate land of free expression, talk radio appears as the "relief" (the subtitle of Oliver Stone's film, *Talk-Radio* was "The Last Neighborhood in America."). Simulation of conversation becomes the real thing. It is not just that the person holding the microphone has power over you through technology, but he has the power to define your freedom of expression any way he (!) wants. And we are looking at the "models" of free expression. God save the First Amendment!