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Editor's Notebook: Talk is Not Cheap

Michael J. Kryzanek

Bridgewater State College, mkryzanek@bridgew.edu

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Talk Is Not Cheap

There are many signs of advanced middle age, some less attractive like greying hair, expanding waistline, diminished athletic ability, and some with a more positive twist such as a penchant for the quiet life and more opportunities to follow that long delayed dream. But recently being a middle-aged man also has translated into being at the center of a demographic contest for the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of those slowly aging white males.

This contest can best be seen in the enormously popular world of AM talk radio. The days of youthful cruising to the tunes on FM have now been replaced by political commentators, almost completely conservative, anxious to convince the 25-54 set that they have the answers to a more secure and prosperous life. Instead of listening to the top 40 songs of the day, the middle-aged white male in the '90s has shifted over to national talk hosts like Rush Limbaugh, Don Imus and Gene Burns and local radio heroes Gerry Williams, Howie Carr, and David Brudnoy. In their cars on the way to and from work, the middle-aged white males can regularly hear a barrage of commentary on the evils of politicians, the plots to expand government control and the ultimate shame of increased taxes.

Listening to these talkmeisters one can easily gain an insight into the political culture of our age with its cynicism, anger, mistrust, self-centeredness and deep resentment of politics and those who practice politics. As these masters of political talk berate the liberal establishment (usually without opportunity for rebuttal) and make fun of the political process (with little interest in defining the complexities of decision-making), it is easy to see why Americans are turned off by politics and feel certain that the country is headed to hell in a handbasket.

But for those who listen to Limbaugh and Williams et al, it is important to remember a few important caveats that cannot be ignored in evaluating what is said on talk radio. First, none of the conservative talk show hosts has ever held elective office. Now for many that might seem to be a huge plus, but it is important to remember that, unlike most of us, politicians make policy decisions in a democratic setting. That means they have to perform their professional trade in ways that may require them to say no, accept compromise, or heaven forbid, change their mind, all the time conscious that their employer has the capacity to take their job away. No one ever said that politics was a “clean” process, but to hear the talk show conservatives, politics is an immoral business that is different from the world that most people live in. If we are to embrace the conservative talk show logic, then what we are saying is that at work or in family life there is no hint of lying, cheating, greed, incompetence, egomania or laziness — only in government and only among the political class.

Secondly, it is important for the followers of the talk show circuit to remember that when Rush Limbaugh or Gene Burns fume against tax increases or programs that shift resources to the poor and middle class they are speaking from their position as millionaires (and probably multi-millionaires). The last time I looked at census figures, the vast majority of the American people were in the income range of $20,000 to $30,000. It is easy to criticize government programs that provide entitlements to those at the lower end of the scale if you are financially secure and do not want to give up what you have. Furthermore, almost everyone in this society receives some form of government entitlement or subsidy. The poor may have welfare, but the rich have business tax credits and all those other deductions.

Lastly, the conservatives constantly attack government as the source of all the ills of our society, rather than looking at the conditions in our society that have caused government to act. Government is big and costly and intrusive but it has gotten that way because the people have wanted the government to solve their problems. Maybe it would be better to take care of our poor through private organizations or have for profit schools, but so far the business community has shown only a mild interest in solving these pressing problems. Say what you want about the big beast of government but there simply is not a realistic alternative to the problems that affect all of society.

When I drive home tonight I’ll have the choice of listening to the talkmeisters berate government and politicians or the range of FM music. I must admit that often the commentators are interesting, provocative and occasionally informative, but tonight I’m going to switch to classic rock, turn the speakers on loud and listen to Led Zeppelin sing Stairway to Heaven — the long version.

Michael Kryzanek
Editor