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Rush Limbaugh

By David Swistock, John Nielsen, and Devin Gillen



Rush Limbaugh at the Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida in April 2019. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.¹

Rush Limbaugh (1951–2021), the infamous conservative radio talk show host, passed away from lung cancer on February 17, 2021.² Limbaugh’s name has been synonymous with populist conservatism since he became a national political radio commentator in 1988.³ During his career, Limbaugh amassed

¹ Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. As a work of the United States federal government, this photograph is public domain.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Rush_Limbaugh#/media/File:Limbaugh_at_Trump_International_Golf_Club_\(46762054255\)_cropped.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Rush_Limbaugh#/media/File:Limbaugh_at_Trump_International_Golf_Club_(46762054255)_cropped.jpg).

² “Rush Limbaugh Is Dead.” Democracy Now! February 18, 2021.

https://www.democracynow.org/2021/2/18/headlines/rush_limbaugh_is_dead.

³ Christopher H. Sterling, Cary O’Dell, and Michael C. Keith, *The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 233.

millions of viewers, mostly white men over thirty-five, to whom he repeatedly espoused controversial attacks against marginalized groups such as feminists, environmentalists, and the LGBTQ+ community.⁴ He consistently equated the difficulties of white men in the United States with those of marginalized communities.⁵ Though not the sole contributor, his success has in part led to the hyperpolarization and emergence of media “echo chambers” that broadly define the modern political public sphere. Researchers Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella use the term “echo chambers” to “capture the ways messages are amplified and reverberate through the conservative opinion media. This “echo chamber” creates a common frame of reference and positive feedback loops for those who listen to, read, and watch these media outlets.”⁶ Limbaugh invested mightily in this type of political discourse, and his effects on the political landscape have been well studied and researched throughout his career.⁷ Furthermore, Limbaugh is credited by many for saving AM radio and pioneering conservative talk radio.⁸

However, it is essential to remember the man for what he was: a vulgar entertainer who profited off inflaming bigoted men’s

⁴ Stephen Earl Bennett, “Who Listens to Rush Limbaugh’s Radio Program and the Relationship Between Listening to Limbaugh and Knowledge of Public Affairs, 1994–2006,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 16, no. 1 (2009): 67.

⁵ Jeff Engelhardt, and Sarah Campbell, “False Double Consciousness: Hermeneutical Resources from the Rush Limbaugh Show,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2018): 310.

⁶ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 76. Jamieson and Cappella also state, “On the plus side, the echo chamber encourages engagement and increases the audience’s ideological coherence; on the downside, its balkanization, polarization, and use of ridicule and ad hominem rhetoric have the potential to undercut individual and national deliberation.”

⁷ David A Jones, “Political Talk Radio: The Limbaugh Effect on Primary Voters,” *Political Communication* 15, no. 3 (1998): 367-381; Joshua Shenk, “Limbaugh’s Lies II,” *New Republic*, August 8, 1994.

⁸ Sterling, O’Dell, and Keith, 233.

cognitive dissonance over the white supremacist structures that saturated the United States.⁹ Limbaugh's corporate parents, Clear Channel Communications' subsidiary, Premiere Radio Networks, continuously foisted him into the public due to the high viewership and popularity, which translated to investors' monetary gain. Despite a career rife with controversies, his radio program would only lose advertisement revenue in 2009 when he referred to a female graduate student, Sandra Fluke (b. 1981), as a "prostitute" and a "slut" following her testimony advocating for hormonal treatment covered by insurance providers.¹⁰

Limbaugh Before National Broadcasting

Rush Hudson Limbaugh III was born on January 12, 1951, in a Missouri town named Cape Girardeau, where Limbaugh's father, grandfather, and uncle were prominent lawyers.¹¹ Therefore, "Rusty," his mother's nickname for him in his childhood, was exposed to politics from an early age, a particular brand of hyper-conservative Republicanism.¹² Limbaugh attended Cape's Central High School in 1965, an institution that had recently integrated

⁹ Engelhard and Campbell. According to Engelhard, and Campbell, the "interpretive resource Limbaugh has created and maintains represents a liberal community as continually making easily dismissed accusations of racism, sexism, transphobia. Limbaugh represents his audience—who are predominantly middle-class white men—as disprivileged and oppressed by these accusations or by the groups who make them."

¹⁰ Nancy J. Legge, James R. DiSanza, John Gribas, and Aubrey Shiffler, "'He Sounded like a Vile, Disgusting Pervert...': an Analysis of Persuasive Attacks on Rush Limbaugh during the Sandra Fluke Controversy," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 19, no. 2 (2012): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2012.722468>. According to the authors, "These attacks cost him a large number of sponsors, cost some radio conglomerates millions of dollars, and were used by the Democrats to paint the entire Republican Party as a bunch of misogynists."

¹¹ Donna L. Halper, *Icons of Talk: The Media Mouths That Changed America* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2009), 172.

¹² Halper, 172.

African-American students for the first time. However, Central High discovered a legal loophole to systemically reinforce an inequitable structure: the African American students were in “special” programs taught by faculty from the former “black-only” school that had burnt down under suspicious circumstances following a basketball victory over Central.¹³ One could say, in light of the developments at Central High, Limbaugh received primary education in a Jim Crow-esque institution.

During his time at Central High, Limbaugh dipped his feet into the world of broadcasting, working part-time at a local station, KGMO, partially owned by his father. Following his high school graduation in 1969, where he not only played football but was also a member of the debate team, Rush briefly attended Southeast Missouri State College.¹⁴ However, after little more than two semesters, Limbaugh dropped out to pursue his interests in a radio career.¹⁵ His previous experience landed him a spot during the morning show at WIXZ, a radio station in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.¹⁶ Limbaugh selected the name “Rusty Sharpe” for his on-air persona at WIXZ and changed his name to “Jeff Christie” when he later moved to a Pittsburgh-based radio station, KQV.¹⁷

After his time with the Pennsylvania radio station, Limbaugh moved to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1979 to work in marketing and promote the Kansas City Royals, the city’s professional baseball team.¹⁸ However, as a well-known media

¹³ Ze’ev Chafets, *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 40. According to Chafets, “‘An informal game was arranged between Central and Cobb High,’ says historian Frank Nickell. ‘Cobb won. Shortly thereafter, Cobb mysteriously burned down.’”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵ Halper, 172.

¹⁶ Sterling, O’Dell, Keith, 234.

¹⁷ Halper, 172.

¹⁸ Roger Chapman, James Ciment, and Tim Lacy, *Culture Wars an Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*. Volumes 1 and 2 (London: Routledge, 2015), 322.

historian with expertise in broadcasting and social history, Donna Halper details, “[Limbaugh] stayed for five years, but while he enjoyed the work and made friends with several of the players, his heart was still in radio. However, he concluded that if he did go back to radio, he wanted to be a talk show host rather than a disc jockey.”¹⁹

Reagan Years (1980s)

In 1983, KUDL in Kansas City gave Rush Limbaugh a position as a talk show host despite a lack of experience in politics or talk radio. Nonetheless, Limbaugh’s career in political commentary was born.²⁰ However, his time at KUDL was short-lived, as only a year later Limbaugh was fired from the station for his extreme political views.²¹ He briefly returned to KMBZ in November of 1983, however, following his termination at KMBZ, Limbaugh moved to Sacramento, California, to work for another radio station, KFBK, in 1984.²² During his time in Sacramento, Limbaugh fine-tuned his chauvinist on-air persona and increased ratings for KFBK.²³

The deregulatory policies of the Reagan administration (1981–1989) were ultimately a massive boost to Limbaugh’s career opportunities. A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) guideline from 1949, known as the Fairness Doctrine, required that any broadcast of controversial opinion regarding issues of public interest must share their airtime with opposing viewpoints. This doctrine stood in the way of more extreme political talk shows, as television stations were required by license to follow these guidelines in an attempt to uphold unbiased broadcasting standards. However, during the Reagan

¹⁹ Halper, 172.

²⁰ Sterling, O’Dell, Keith, 234.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

²² *Ibid.*, 234.

²³ *Ibid.*, 245.

administration, the FCC vetoed the bill on August 4, 1987.²⁴ The deregulation of the airways allowed Limbaugh to run his show how he wanted, and at the same time, avoid being fired for his political views, unlike his time at KMBZ.

In this new era of deregulated media, Limbaugh met media executive Edward McLaughlin (1926–2018), who saw potential in Limbaugh and his brand of political commentary, and the two began their partnership.²⁵ Since there was no real competition against the two for a national AM political talk show in these years, McLaughlin convinced fifty-seven stations across several cities to host the show. August 1, 1988, was Limbaugh's first national radio broadcast as the mouthpiece for conservative populism.²⁶ Within only two years, Limbaugh had 177 stations broadcasting his show nationwide.²⁷

Limbaugh would come to be defined by this media career, as his character and on-air persona became a household name with the expansion of his audience across the nation, whether for good or ill. The highly politicized nature of contemporary United States news media was not nearly as extreme during this time. Limbaugh's experiment in one-sided punditry made him a pioneer in an industry that has produced figures like Alex Jones, Ben Shapiro, Glenn Beck, and Tucker Carlson (the most-watched news show host today).²⁸ These hosts sought to create their own shows that replicated Limbaugh's popular bombastic format, only legal following the FCC deregulation. The adverse effects of this deregulation and Limbaugh's influence over American media are

²⁴ Robert Slayton, "Ronald Reagan's Worst Decision Created Rush Limbaugh," Public Seminar, March 4, 2021, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/ronald-reagans-worst-decision-created-rush-limbaugh/>.

²⁵ Halper, 173-174.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁸ Mark Joyella, "Tucker Carlson Is Most-Watched Host In Cable News For Last Week," *Forbes Magazine*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2020/06/16/tucker-carlson-takes-title-as-most-watched-host-in-cable-news/?sh=69c5bf8032f4>.

demonstrated by the likes of Limbaugh's imitators, as seen with the 2020 dismissal of a slander lawsuit by the United States District Judge Mary Kay Vyskocil (in agreement with Fox News lawyers), protecting Tucker Carlson's supposed right to spew thinly veiled lies as news. American reporter, David Folkenflik, states, "[Carlson] is not stating 'actual facts' about the topics he discusses and is instead engaging in 'exaggeration' and 'non-literal commentary.'"²⁹ The fact a sitting United States judge ruled in favor of such one-sided commentary to be run as the most-watched American "news" program in 2020 can only be understood as a continual slide into complacency for misinformation that began with the 1987 FCC deregulation and Limbaugh's rise to popularity.

While Limbaugh's exact impact on the success of conservative talk shows is unknown, the country was becoming more conservative, and the growth of conservative media reflected that change.³⁰ Limbaugh successfully gave a voice to those who accepted the false double consciousness that asserted that conservative Republicans, predominantly white males, were facing attacks from liberals calling them to recognize racism, sexism, and transphobia. According to psychoanalytic research partners Jeff Engelhardt and Sarah Campbell, authors of the study "False Double Consciousness: Hermeneutical Resources from the Rush Limbaugh Show," Limbaugh falsely frames arguments concerning issues such as racism and feminism, so his listeners view any social or political success for minorities in the United States as an

²⁹ David Folkenflik, "You Literally Can't Believe The Facts Tucker Carlson Tells You. So Say Fox's Lawyers," NPR. September 29, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/917747123/you-literally-cant-believe-the-facts-tucker-carlson-tells-you-so-say-fox-s-lawyers>.

³⁰ Halper, 174. Halper states, "it would be an oversimplification to dismiss Limbaugh as just another partisan. After all, there had been right-wing talk show hosts on the air prior to Limbaugh, but none became as popular or as dominant. It is not an exaggeration to say that Rush Limbaugh put conservative talk radio on the map. How it happened is still the subject of scholarly debate, but the short answer is that as the country was becoming more conservative, Limbaugh reflected that change and gave voice to millions of people who felt he spoke for them and understood their issues."

implied attack on white men.³¹ Throughout Limbaugh's career, he framed liberal criticism of bigotry as nefarious attempts to silence conservative protests on government spending, liberal media bias, environmental excesses, and feminism on a near-daily basis.³²

The 1990s

Limbaugh's show peaked during the mid-1990s, broadcasting to over 665 stations nationwide, reaching more than twenty million people.³³ From 1988 until 1996, the year Fox News launched, Limbaugh was *the* voice of the conservative movement.³⁴ He became a multimedia star reaching the eyes and ears of millions of Americans with two best-selling books, a magazine called the *Limbaugh Letter*, and a television show.³⁵ Limbaugh claimed to use these platforms to voice the voiceless but instead continued to espouse conspiracy theories and insults against Democrats.

After George H. W. Bush (1924–2018) lost his presidential reelection campaign in 1992, former president Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) reportedly wrote Limbaugh a letter designating him

³¹ Engelhardt and Campbell, 310-311. According to Engelhardt and Campbell, "In false double consciousness, a privileged and oppressing group represents themselves as dis-privileged and oppressed either by claims that they are privileged/oppressive or by calls for them to acknowledge their privilege/oppression."

³² Chapman, and Ciment, 323. Chapman and Ciment state that, "Limbaugh's conservative ideals generally support the Republican Party and always denigrate the Democratic Party. Perhaps with his marriage foibles in mind, he has rarely appropriated the 'family values' rhetoric of evangelicals. He has instead focused on the "dangers" of government spending, liberal media bias, feminism, the Clinton family, H. Ross Perot, political correctness, and what he has regarded as environmentalists' excesses."

³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁴ Nicole Hemmer, "The Comeback," in *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 265.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

as the “leader of the Republican Party.”³⁶ Limbaugh touted this designation and used this “appointed position” to provide conservative legislators support in their Republican Revolution of 1994 when the party retook majority control of the House of Representatives after decades of Democratic dominance.³⁷ His thrust to the forefront of Republican politics came from his show’s ability to reach such a large audience. While the actual effects of his show on the election are unknown, Republican lawmakers and party members awarded him with a “majority makers” pin for playing his part.³⁸ Furthermore, Republicans, such as Newt Gingrich, honored him with the position of keynote speaker at a dinner following the 1994 election.³⁹

Throughout the Clinton administration (1993–2001), Limbaugh frequently attacked the First Lady on his show. Hillary Clinton was one of the most politically active First Ladies of the United States, having headed the Task Force on National Health Care Reform to develop a universal healthcare system, coined “Hillary-care,” during her husband’s first term (1993–1996).⁴⁰ Limbaugh repeatedly attacked her, referring to her as a “bitch” and “ugly;” he questioned her gender and her sexuality, and even

³⁶ Halper, 270-271. The letter read, “‘Dear Rush...thanks for all you’re doing to promote Republican and conservative principles. Now that I’ve retired from active politics, I don’t mind that you’ve become the number one voice for conservatism in our country.’ Beaming with pride, Limbaugh read the letter on his television show. The Limbaugh era of Republican politics had arrived.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁸ Kevin Merida, “Rush Limbaugh Saluted as a ‘Majority Maker,’” *The Washington Post*, December 11, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/12/11/rush-limbaugh-saluted-as-a-majority-maker/e4f879c5-a0d2-43b8-ac56-9e24ceb82b62/>. Merida notes that “Limbaugh was presented [with] a ‘Majority Makers’ pin, the emblem of the newcomers who have given their party majority status in the House for the first time in 40 years. Six GOP women in the class added their own special thanks, presenting Limbaugh with a plaque that said: ‘Rush was right.’ And Rep.-elect Barbara Cubin (R-Wyo.) added: ‘There’s not a femiNazi among us.’”

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Chapman, and Ciment, 98.

attacked her thirteen-year-old daughter, slandering her by referring to her as a dog.⁴¹

Through the corporate Trojan horse Coalition for Health Care Choice, the pharmaceutical industry-funded Limbaugh's supposed grassroots campaign in 1993 to damage the universal healthcare initiative. Limbaugh gave fiery rants about how "Hillary-care" was essentially a form of Stalinism.⁴² Following these rants, an industry-sponsored ad then came in during the commercial break: "If you're upset about health care reform, call 800-000-0000."⁴³ From there, callers were connected to their congressperson's office free of charge. According to propaganda expert John Stauber, the damage of this "Astroturf" system (an outwardly "grassroots" campaign funded or organized by large donors and organizations) was the potentially permanent diminishment of genuine grassroots campaigns. With the introduction of corporations as the dominant force, community-built movements became overshadowed by the overwhelming resources held by the corporate world.⁴⁴ In the end, Hillary-care died on the House floor in 1994.⁴⁵

He continued to attack Hillary Clinton by affording considerable airtime to the Whitewater Controversy. This controversy stemmed from a failed 1992 real estate deal in

⁴¹ Jeffrey M. Berry, and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and The New Incivility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5; Robert E Brown, "The President of Talk Radio: The Crystallization of a Social Movement," *American Behavioral Scientist* 61, no. 5 (2017): 497, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217693279>.

⁴² Philip J. Hilts, "Coalition Opposing Health Plan Is Called Front Group for Insurers." *The New York Times*, October 20, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/20/us/coalition-opposing-health-plan-is-called-front-group-for-insurers.html>.

⁴³ John Stauber, "Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies, and the Public Relations Industry," *Democracy Now!* March 5, 1996, https://www.democracynow.org/1996/3/5/toxic_sludge_is_good_for_you.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Chapman, and Ciment, 98.

Arkansas, just before the Clinton presidency.⁴⁶ When White House deputy counsel Vince Foster (1945–1993) tragically took his own life, Limbaugh used the tragedy to accuse Hillary of wrong-doing, going as far as accusing her outright of arranging his death.⁴⁷ While Foster’s death had little to do with the scandal itself, his position as a lawyer for the Clinton administration allowed Limbaugh to take advantage of tabloid reports that claimed he was murdered and, further, that essential documents on the Whitewater Scandal had been taken from his home by the Clintons.⁴⁸ It is generally agreed these attacks swayed the system’s popularity, and, as stated, “Hillary-care” died on the House floor in 1994.⁴⁹

Despite his television show’s success, in 1996, the same year Fox News launched, Limbaugh returned to his radio program.⁵⁰ His show gradually became less prevalent throughout the early 2000s as new conservative personalities began to steal some of his audience.⁵¹ Moreover, Limbaugh’s show was most culturally relevant when the Republicans were voted out of power, especially out of the presidency. Therefore, despite a slight decline in popularity during George W. Bush’s presidency, Limbaugh’s popularity rose again with Barack Obama’s successful presidential campaign in 2008.⁵²

⁴⁶ Chapman, and Ciment, 98.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ Russell Watson, “Vince Foster’s Suicide: The Rumor Mill Churns,” *Newsweek*, March 20, 1994, <https://www.newsweek.com/vince-fosters-suicide-rumor-mill-churns-185900>.

⁴⁹ Chapman, and Ciment, 98.

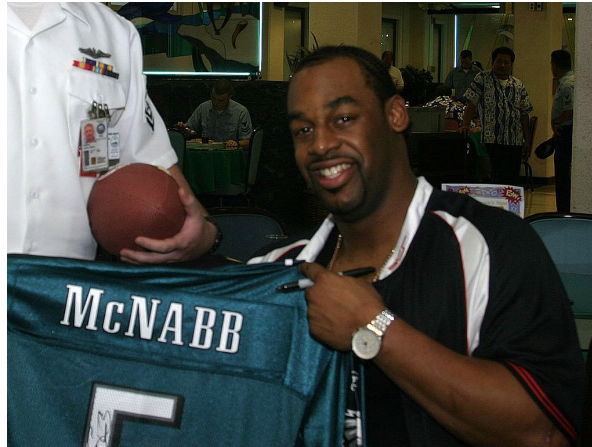
⁵⁰ Hemmer 265.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 267. Hemmer notes that a “slew of new hosts gained national syndication between 2000 and 2002: Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Laura Ingraham, Bill O’Reilly, Glenn Beck, Mark Levin, Monica Crowley...2007 study of 257 news/talk stations by the progressive Center for American Progress found 91 percent of the programming was conservative, an imbalance they concluded was not market driven but a result of “multiple structural problems in the U.S. regulatory system.”

⁵² Sterling, O’Dell, and Keith. 234.

Rush Limbaugh 2000–2008

Limbaugh's years under the Bush Administration were filled with numerous controversies due to his harsh on-air statements, as well as adversities that surrounded his personal life. The persona that he enveloped himself with was a magnet for polemics from his early days. After his significant growth in the 1990s, he ran into many more controversies. However, they brought his name into the spotlight once more. Ironically, the hatred against him was a prominent part of why his radio shows reached such high heights of success.⁵³



Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb in 2004. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.⁵⁴

Despite more than a decade of controversial statements defining his public persona, ESPN ostensibly accepted the cliché that no press is bad press by deciding to offer Limbaugh a job in

⁵³ Chafets, 75.

⁵⁴ As a work of the United States federal government, this photograph is public domain in the United States.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Donovan_McNabb#/media/File:Donovan_McNabb.jpg.

2003, presumably to gain popularity through shock factor.⁵⁵ Near immediately, Limbaugh made racist comments on air about Donovan McNabb, the Philadelphia Eagles starting quarterback at the time. The comments centered around how the Eagles struggled at the beginning of the season since McNabb was only a quarterback because, as Limbaugh alleged, the media “desired” black quarterbacks and coaches. After the national controversy, Limbaugh resigned only a month after he had started at ESPN.⁵⁶

Limbaugh was the focus of several other controversies during this time as well. In 2006, Limbaugh made fun of actor Michael J. Fox, known for his role in *Back to the Future*, by saying that he looked like he was exaggerating the effects of his Parkinson’s disease symptoms.⁵⁷ This tasteless accusation occurred after the actor had released political ads that supported candidates that had advocated for stem-cell research.⁵⁸ The following year, Limbaugh again found controversy by calling soldiers who did not support the Iraq War (2003–2011) “phony soldiers.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵Douglas Hartmann, “Rush Limbaugh, Donovan McNabb, and ‘A Little Social Concern,’” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31, no. 1 (2007): 45–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723506296831>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁷ “Michael’s Story,” The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research | Parkinson's Disease, accessed May 2021,
<https://www.michaeljfox.org/michaels-story>. Fox has reportedly suffered from the disease since 1991.

⁵⁸ David Montgomery, “Limbaugh Mocks Michael J. Fox Political Ad,” NBC News, NBC Universal News Group, October 25, 2006,
<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna15408508>; Amy Goodman and Arthur Caplan, “Rightwing Attacks on Stem Cell Research Advocate Michael J. Fox Spotlight One of Election 2006’s Most Heated Ballot Issues.” Democracy Now! November 1, 2006.
https://www.democracynow.org/2006/11/1/rightwing_attacks_on_stem_cell_research.

⁵⁹ Jeremy Schulman, “Limbaugh Falsely Recasts ‘Phony Soldiers’ Smear.” Media Matters for America, September 28, 2007,
<https://www.mediamatters.org/rush-limbaugh/limbaugh-falsely-recasts-phony-soldiers-smear>. According to Schulman, “On September 28, Limbaugh asserted

Moving away from his on-air personality, Limbaugh suffered various difficulties in his personal life during the beginning of the new millennia. In 2001, for example, Limbaugh announced that he was deaf and would likely be completely unable to have auditory perception without the assistance of hearing technology, like a cochlear implant.⁶⁰ Limbaugh's personal life again made major news broke of his arrest for drug charges in 2006. Limbaugh had previously publicly announced his battle with addiction and had entered into a drug rehabilitation facility, but the prosecution charged that he had continued. The case was dismissed under the stipulation that Limbaugh must continue to seek treatment for his addiction.⁶¹ It should be made clear: one's struggle with addiction is nothing to be criticized. However, what is worthy of criticism is hypocritically using an immense public platform to unsympathetically attack and call for the prosecution of others struggling with addiction. Limbaugh frequently made such attacks, saying, "Drug use, some might say, is destroying this country.... And so if people are violating the law by doing drugs, they ought to be accused and they ought to be convicted, and they ought to be sent up."⁶² These personal hurdles, however, did not stop Limbaugh from continuing his radio show.

that his 'phony soldiers' comment was a reference to Jesse MacBeth, an anti-war activist who pleaded guilty to one count of making false statements to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for pretending to be an injured Iraq war veteran. However, Limbaugh did not refer to MacBeth during his September 26 broadcast until one minute and 50 seconds after making his 'phony soldiers' comment."

⁶⁰ Frank Ahrens, "Radio's Rush Limbaugh Suffers Rapid Hearing Loss," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2001.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2001/10/09/radios-rush-limbaugh-suffers-rapid-hearing-loss/b9d23acb-2e34-4982-b819-814629baa8e9/>.

⁶¹ "Rush Limbaugh Arrested On Drug Charges," CBS News, July 16, 2007, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rush-limbaugh-arrested-on-drug-charges/>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Obama Years (2008–2016)

Limbaugh once again rose to relevancy during the 2008 Democratic Primary, which quickly narrowed to front-runners Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Continuing his career in outrage, Limbaugh dedicated airtime to creating a fallacious “straw-man” out of Obama and labeled the future president a “Magical Negro.”⁶³ Limbaugh explained how this metaphor (with minstrel show origins) described liberal white Americans’ desire, as Limbaugh saw it, to use Obama to absolve them of their racial sins; a parody song typically followed this accusation. Limbaugh, of course, denied that such actions indicated any racist beliefs on his part.

During the United States presidential primaries in 2008, Limbaugh launched “Operation Chaos,” hoping to improve the Republican candidate’s chances of winning by extending the election.⁶⁴ Specifically, Limbaugh called for his supporters to strategically switch sides to vote for Hillary Clinton, who was trailing Obama. Limbaugh hoped this strategy would politically bloody Obama, thus making him look like a weaker candidate for president, a strategy Dr. Stephen Earl Bennett argues was not enormously successful.⁶⁵ Despite its lack of measurable efficacy, it nonetheless speaks to the obsession with antagonizing the Democratic Party that Limbaugh manipulated to create a triumphant example of political performance art.⁶⁶

Determined to do his part to deepen the growing political divide in the United States for his own profit, Limbaugh hoped for catastrophe in Obama’s presidency. On his show after the

⁶³ Chapman, and Ciment, 412.

⁶⁴ Frank E. Stephenson, “Strategic Voting in Open Primaries: Evidence from Rush Limbaugh’s ‘Operation Chaos,’” *Public Choice* 148, no. 3-4 (2010):446, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-010-9664-z>.

⁶⁵ Bennett, 67.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

presidential inauguration, Limbaugh stated, “I hope he fails.”⁶⁷ This statement shows how Limbaugh, a multi-millionaire, actively hoped for Americans to suffer from inadequate presidential guidance during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.⁶⁸

A key achievement of the Obama administration was the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), a comprehensive healthcare reform bill that was signed into law on March 23, 2010.⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, Limbaugh regularly targeted the legislation on his broadcast, fallaciously linking the reform to Nazism.⁷⁰ Limbaugh also falsely attributed this accusation to “Hillary-care” in the 1990s.⁷¹ As a part of the ACA’s ongoing implementation, Obama mandated that insurance providers cover contraceptives to uphold women’s reproductive rights.⁷² In response, the United States Congress investigated the constitutionality of the mandate.⁷³

⁶⁷ Chafets, 14.

⁶⁸ From 2007 to 2008, the United States and the rest of the globe faced a financial crisis.

⁶⁹ Uwe E. Reinhardt, “Wrapping Your Head Around the Health Bill,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2010, <https://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/wrapping-your-head-around-the-health-bill>.

⁷⁰ Berry and Sobieraj, 49. When discussing the similarities between Obama’s health care plan and socialism, Berry and Sobieraj note that “Limbaugh suggested there were ‘gazillions of similarities between National Socialism in Germany and Obama’s health-care plan,’ but made clear, ‘Nobody is saying that Obama is Hitler...What we’re saying is that this healthcare plan mirrors Nazi Germany’s. And the Nazi Germany healthcare plan was the foundation from which they built the rest of their socialist paradise.’”

⁷¹ Stauber.

⁷² Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler, 173–205. It should be noted that “the insurance company, not the faith-based organization, would be responsible for contacting the employee and offering coverage of contraception in their insurance plan free of charge. The insurance carrier, not the religious organization, would dispense and pay for this coverage.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 174.

A significant portion of the investigation consisted of a series of planned testimonies, including one by a Georgetown graduate student named Sandra Fluke.⁷⁴ Fluke gave compelling testimony in front of Democratic Congress members, rather than the entire Congress, detailing why hormone treatment is an essential part of many women's health.⁷⁵ She pointed out how her Catholic University's health coverage did not provide affordable access to these vital medications at an affordable price.⁷⁶ Initially, Republicans developed their opposition as a First Amendment debate, arguing that the mandate otherwise violated the Catholic university's religious freedom.⁷⁷

However, Limbaugh's derogatory slander of Fluke over a three-day tirade quickly overtook the moralist religious argument.⁷⁸ Limbaugh incorrectly claimed that the amount of hormonal treatment a woman receives directly correlates to how much sex she was having.⁷⁹ His verbal assault on Fluke continued as he stated, "What does that make [Fluke]? It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute. She wants to be paid to have sex. She's having so much sex she can't afford the contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay her to have sex."⁸⁰ Limbaugh further suggested Fluke wanted Obama or the Pope to pay for her to have sex.⁸¹ While doubling down on his verbal

⁷⁴ Jessica L. Furgerson, and William L. Benoit, "Limbaugh's Loose Lips: Rush Limbaugh's Image Repair after the Sandra Fluke Controversy," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 20, no. 2 (2013): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2013.823971>.

⁷⁵ Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler, 176.

⁷⁶ Berry and Sobieraj, 3.

⁷⁷ Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler, 174.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁸⁰ "Limbaugh Calls Student Birth Control Activist a 'Slut,'" Democracy Now! March 1, 2012, https://www.democracynow.org/2012/3/1/headlines/limbaugh_calls_student_birth_control_activist_a_slut.

⁸¹ Furgerson and Benoit, 278.

assault in the following days, Limbaugh facetiously requested Fluke and other college students pursuing their constitutional rights record themselves engaged in sexual activity and post said recordings on the internet so the taxpayers could see what they were paying for.⁸²

There was a huge public outcry in response to Limbaugh's verbal assault against Fluke.⁸³ The most severe consequence for Limbaugh was the loss of advertisers to his show. This response is surprising in retrospect because Limbaugh, as previously detailed, had made a career out of making boisterously vulgar remarks.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, in the fallout of the Fluke controversy, Limbaugh bore rapidly diminishing advertising revenue, affecting himself and fellow right-wing pundits such as Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck. For example, the Ford Motor Company, supposedly unaware their ads ran on offensive programs like Limbaugh's and Beck's, permanently pulled their ads from such broadcasts.⁸⁵ Amidst this fallout, Limbaugh gave a tepid apology on-air to Sandra Fluke.⁸⁶

Limbaugh was also central in propagating the "birther" movement rumors surrounding Obama's presidency. Laced with thinly veiled racism, the slanderous conspiracy theory supposes Obama is not a "natural born citizen" and was, in reality, born to a Muslim family in Kenya.⁸⁷ Limbaugh dedicated a sizable sum of airtime to the ludicrous assertion while simultaneously claiming to be "color-blind" on the topic of race. This attack was the latest example of Limbaugh's lust for proliferating gross misinformation

⁸² Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler, 174.

⁸³ Berry and Sobieraj, 3.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵ "96 More Companies Pull Ads from Rush Limbaugh's Program," Democracy Now! March 13, 2012, https://www.democracynow.org/2012/3/13/headlines/96_more_companies_pull_ads_from_rush_limbaughs_program.

⁸⁶ Furgerson and Benoit, 273.

⁸⁷ Charles Rivers Editors, *Rush Limbaugh: The Life and Legacy of the Conservative Political Commentator Behind America's Most Popular Radio Show* (Boston: Charles River Editors, 2020), 29.

through a fallacious framing of the political arguments. This manipulation of information for provocative political gain became a focal point of Donald Trump's strategy to win the presidential campaign.⁸⁸

Twilight Years 2016–2021

At his 2020 State of the Union Address, then-President Donald Trump awarded Limbaugh with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States.⁸⁹ The cyclical relationship between radical conservative media and politics crescendoed at this point of honor for Limbaugh. Limbaugh's extreme right populism helped build the audience that supported Trump and shared Trump's extreme pseudo-populist rhetoric in his 2016 presidential campaign. Trump and Limbaugh openly shared the same set of chauvinist and racist beliefs. Limbaugh's conspiracy-ridden ideologies and nationalist beliefs had gone beyond their previously attained heights in mainstream media; his influence now reached the top of the American government. In 2020, Rush Limbaugh was number one in talk radio with 15.5 million listeners, a million more than Sean Hannity's show at the time.⁹⁰ Limbaugh helped build the political climate that became synonymous with Trump's image upon his

⁸⁸ Rush Limbaugh, "Rush for President? Maybe Trump Made It Possible!" The Rush Limbaugh Show, November 21, 2018, <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2018/11/21/rush-for-president-maybe-trump-made-it-possible/>. In a conversation discussing his possible run for president, Limbaugh stated that the "word feminazi might kill [his] candidacy. But now with Trump having busted through all those kinds of barriers, it may be possible now."

⁸⁹ Matthew Daly, "Radio Host Limbaugh Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom," *Associated Press News*, February 4, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/d79a7eead68d6a304d38b665e6f89c2a>.

⁹⁰ Jennifer Harper, "Nielsen: TV Viewing Now 'Dwarfed' by Huge Talk Radio Audience," *The Washington Times*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/2/inside-the-beltway-nielsen-media-research-reality/>.

entrance into the political arena; symbiotically, the era of Trump also launched Limbaugh to the top of his career.

This period was also the end of his career in talk radio. In early 2020, Rush Limbaugh announced on air that he had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Only a month before his on-air reveal, he had renewed his four-year contract with the company that syndicated his show.⁹¹ Limbaugh, at least publicly, led the last years of his life with relative calm and coolness for someone given a terminal diagnosis that matched his brash on-air persona. The show went on. The Capitol Riot of January 6, 2021, was among the last meaningful events before Limbaugh's death. Incumbent Trump disputed the 2020 election results, and significant claims of voter fraud wracked the nation, claims spurred on by media figures such as Limbaugh.⁹² Limbaugh minimized Donald Trump's potential role in the incitement of the violence and maximized the blame for the actions of the insurrectionists on the political left and their supposed stealing of the election.⁹³ In fact, Limbaugh afforded air time to a guest that claimed, "I feel 100% confident based on the way the events rolled out that it had to have been Antifa because everybody was so peaceful."⁹⁴ Only a little over a

⁹¹ "Rush Limbaugh Reveals Advanced Lung Cancer Diagnosis Live on Radio Show." BBC news, February 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51365762>.

⁹² George Prayias, "What Else Can We Do to Fight Back Against This Stolen Election?," The Rush Limbaugh Show, December 22, 2020, <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2020/12/22/what-else-can-we-do-to-fight-back-against-this-stolen-election/>; George Prayias, "I Warned You About What We're Living Through Today." The Rush Limbaugh Show, January 7, 2021. <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2021/01/07/i-warned-you-about-what-were-living-through-today/>.

⁹³ Justin Peters, "Rush Limbaugh Signed On for 2021 Just in Time to Blame Democrats for the Capitol Riot," *Slate Magazine*, January 8, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/01/rush-limbaugh-trump-capitol-riot.html>.

⁹⁴ George Prayias, "Trump Rally Attendees Suspect Antifa Infiltration," The Rush Limbaugh Show, January 7, 2021,

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month after this event, Rush Limbaugh died on February 17, 2021, due to his struggle with lung cancer. Immediately following his death, a popular Instagram page raised over one million dollars for Planned Parenthood in an ironic honor of Limbaugh.⁹⁵

Limbaugh left an immense legacy behind. The influence and sway he had over millions of conservative voters left behind a noticeable footprint in American media and politics. What is Limbaugh's legacy exactly? A war against truth. He helped to spawn the birther movement as a mainstream conspiracy; he created conspiracies against climate change and made a living out of mocking those with different political ideologies. He was a man whose life was enveloped in politics, and his life will be remembered for those overtly political aspects of his persona because to many Americans, that is who he was. He was *the* conservative talk show guy: spawning other talk shows and podcasts that follow his formula based on conspiracies and hate, creating the kind of people who attempted an insurrection at the capitol.

<https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2021/01/07/trump-rally-attendees-suspect-antifa-infiltration/>.

⁹⁵ Jon Brown, "Instagram User Raises More Than \$1 Million For Planned Parenthood To Spite Rush Limbaugh," The Daily Wire, February 21, 2021, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/instagram-user-raises-more-than-1-million-for-planned-parenthood-to-spite-rush-limbaugh>.

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Author Bios

David Swistock is scheduled to graduate in 2021 with a Bachelor of Arts in History. With this degree, he plans to pursue a career in teaching history at the high school level. History is, to him, the art of interpretation; the ability to think critically. He hopes his passion reflects through not only his writing but his eventual teaching as well. It was an absolute privilege for him to write this piece alongside Devin Gillen and John Nielsen. They have taught him an indescribable level of knowledge from the work they accomplished together. He is, likewise, enormously appreciative of the work of his editor, Angel Rivas, whose work helped elevate the project's voice to an otherwise unobtainable degree.



Devin Gillen is currently a student at California State University, San Bernardino scheduled to graduate with his Bachelor of Arts in History in 2022. He hopes to return to CSUSB to work on a master's degree in history and ultimately wishes to teach at the university level and publish future works. Devin is interested in history, philosophy, political science, and art history. He is also interested in pursuing artistic endeavors, ranging from multi-media work to painting and screen printing. He plays multiple instruments, which he hopes to make a career of in tandem with academic work. Prior to working as an author and editor on *History in the Making*, Devin planned to compile and print a zine of independent art and essays on global politics and history to be handed out at local concerts to educate the “underground.” Devin would like to thank the editorial board at large, and David Swistock in particular for bringing him on to work on this piece.



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John Nielsen is an undergraduate at California State University, San Bernardino. As a history major, he is hoping to focus on authoritarian societies, with a particular emphasis on those that arose out of Europe. He wants to go into the political sphere to help voters and candidates better understand the importance of democratic systems and how quickly they can change. In his spare time, he enjoys taking time outside to camp or hike; he also has a deep interest in listening to and playing music. His primary thanks go to fellow student, David Swistock, for inviting him to assist in writing for the journal.

