Twitter Thread by Matthew Sheffield



Matthew Sheffield
@mattsheffield



Thread: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative Id

On the day of his passing, it's worth doing a brief retrospective on how Rush Limbaugh's personal life almost perfectly paralleled American conservatism...

One thing that's not commonly known about Rush Limbaugh is that he began his career in sports, doing sales for the Kansas City Royals baseball team. That's significant because much of the tribalism and dumbed-down rhetoric in American TV news directly came from sports media.

Television journalism in its earliest days was a fantastic product with real investigative reporting, no filibustering live interviews, and no soundbites. This began changing in the 1970s when ABC Sports president Roone Arledge was put in charge of ABC News.

Limbaugh tried to be a conventional FM deejay but kept getting fired because his personality was too abrasive. After working with the Royals, he began a small political talk show for a Sacremento station. The Reagan repeal of the Fairness Doctrine made his show possible.

Rush Limbaugh's Sacramento show started in 1984 (he replaced Morton Downey Jr) and after 5 years, he was picked up by ABC Radio which was trying to copy some of the sensationalism that ABC News television had started. It was a perfect fit.

While Rush Limbaugh's uneducated background (he flunked out of college according to his mother) brought him some regular-guy cred, his style of saying anything to trigger liberal outrage wasn't his invention. In fact, William F. Buckley started the trend in the 1950s.

Buckley's first book, God and Man at Yale, was hundreds of pages of him trying to cancel atheist professors. He wrote a second book with Brent Bozell Jr. dedicated to defending the disgraced Joe McCarthy. He even once threatened to punch a liberal commentator (on ABC, fancy that)

Rush Limbaugh merely updated the Buckley shtick, adding parody songs, conspiracy theories, & guttural insults of political figures.

Limbaugh's show was a hit among fundamentalist Christians who'd raged for decades that their beliefs were mocked. Rush

was their equalizer.

Republican elites were overjoyed at Limbaugh's emergence as a national figure. Buckley saw a kindred spirit and almost immediately befriended Limbaugh as well. Rush was invited to the Bush 41 White House as an honored guest.

Talk radio was different in its earlier days. In the 80s and 90s, it almost exclusively was a megaphone for GOP politicians, lending them air support against the evil Democrats.

But this changed over time as the hosts were courted by the extremists who run right-wing DC groups.

The blowout of Barry Goldwater in 1964 made some conservatives like Buckley realize that Americans would never want to eliminate the welfare state. He, Goldwater, and Reagan became somewhat more moderate afterwards. But the true believers like Brent Bozell Jr. became crazier.

After working extensively with his brother-in-law Buckley, Brent Bozell broke things off as he began realizing that the US would never adopt the Christofascism that he wanted. In 1965, he literally moved to Spain to live under the dictator Francisco Franco.

But Bozell wasn't content to leave America alone. He started up a far-right Catholic magazine called Triumph & a Christian Proud Boys group called "Sons of Thunder." In 1970, he was arrested for using giant crucifix as a battering ram and weapon against police.

Despite never being popular with the public, the far right has always been lavishly funded by billionaire business magnates who hated the government & wanted Christian supremacy.

The conservative establishment bought off talk radio and turned it much more extreme than it began.

Rush Limbaugh was never particularly religious himself but he knew where the audience was and where his fat-cat friends were. So he never spoke up about their Christian nationalism and intolerance. And he continued embracing whatever radicals that came along.

As @Mr_JamesLandis noted in 2016, that even included embracing the then-new "alt-right" movement which was trying to meme nazism into American politics. I don't think Limbaugh really knew what he was doing then, but he indisputably was a fan at first https://t.co/gXZhM4ywKa

Because conservatives so utterly succeeded at canceling moderates in the GOP, Rush Limbaugh and other established talk radio hosts were always under constant pressure to move further and further right since there is no energy in the center of the Republican party.

Also like so many in the far-right establishment, Rush Limbaugh refused to think ahead past his own demise and so he failed to raise up a successor, even as he knew he had terminal cancer. His program will likely have no future at all, leaving many stations with lost revenues.

Limbaugh's refusal to think deeply about his own legacy and future program were of a piece though. His career represented the conservative Id killing the conservative superego. It's why there are no Republican policies on much of anything domestically. All that's left is rage.

The 1/6 Capitol attack was eerily foreshadowed on Rush Limbaugh's 11/20/20 program when a man called into the show and in tears told Rush that he had nothing left in life and was willing to die for Donald Trump

To the end of is days, Limbaugh never once acknowledged what he was doing to his audience, that he had fed them a diet of hate and never offered them an actual way forward. He never wondered why the candidates he supported were never able to achieve the things they both wanted.

My friend @LeslieVryenhoek has a great short podcast series talking about how Rush Limbaugh warped her parents' minds with decades of brainwashing. It's worth a listen to get a look inside the mind of talk radio fans. https://t.co/IqXwGBurBT

OK this thread is long enough. If you want to read more about the GOP's endless cycle of radicalization, I wrote a piece about it in Salon that might be of interest: https://t.co/Elm4t3E2AB

PS: I had forgotten to mention that Limbaugh's ABC intersections continued later on in his career when he briefly served as a Monday Night Football commentator https://t.co/ezw7t5bs8F

> And it's interesting that another overlap of sports and this new form of "journalism" was Limbaugh getting a gig on Monday Night Football which was created by Roone Arledge.
>
> — Chris Floyd (@cffloyd) February 17, 2021

Oh and it's also worth adding that in the 1990s, Rush Limbaugh hosted a syndicated television talk show. His executive producer was Roger Ailes, who put what he learned into Fox News shortly thereafter.