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Co-author (with Noam Chomsky) of *Manufacturing Consent*

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Extra! **November/December 2003**

An Aggressive Conservative vs. a "Liberal to be Determined"

The false balance of Hannity & Colmes

By **Steve Rendall**

Hannity & Colmes, **Fox News Channel's** primetime debate show, figures prominently in the cable network's campaign to market its right leaning programming as "fair & balanced," the network's ever-present slogan. **Fox News** executives argue that the show, pitting conservative Sean Hannity against liberal Alan Colmes with guests from both right and left, presents a spirited and evenhanded nightly debate.

Fox News president Roger Ailes is clearly riled by those who suggest the show has a slant to it (**New York Times**, 6/24/01): "I get attacked for putting Sean Hannity on because he's a conservative--even when Alan Colmes, the liberal, is there to balance him!" Ailes is so insistent that **Hannity & Colmes** plays it "down the middle" that he says producers use a stopwatch to ensure equal time between the two hosts (**Washington Post**, 2/5/01).

But a systematic review of **Hannity & Colmes** does reveal a show listing to the right in virtually every respect, from mismatched hosts--the show pairs the aggressive conservative Sean Hannity with the mildly liberal, often conciliatory Alan Colmes--to a format where conservatives out-number, out-talk and out-interrupt their liberal opponents.

The dissimilar circumstances under which the two hosts came to **Fox News** are revealing. Recruited from Atlanta's talk radio scene by Roger Ailes, Hannity was hired so far in advance of a decision about a co-host that **Fox** staffers referred to the show as "Hannity & Liberal To Be Determined," or "LTBD." Finally, after auditioning prospective left hosts, Colmes won the job--after Hannity expressed his preference for the mild-mannered New York radio host (**Newsday**, 10/20/98).

The result is a debate show that doesn't add up to a fair fight, say many critics, because Colmes' wishy-washy views and low-key delivery just can't stand up to the relentlessly ideological and combative Sean Hannity. It's a widely held view outside **Fox** studios.

"The title...**Hannity & Colmes**, is something of a misnomer, because the other host--the timid, bespectacled liberal Alan Colmes--acts essentially as a sacrificial lamb and may as well not be there," reads a review in Britain's **Sunday Business Post** (8/24/03). Other critics are

no less harsh. When the show recently began featuring a weekly commentary by outspoken conservative comic Dennis Miller, further weighting the discussion to the right, **Los Angeles Times** television critic Howard Rosenberg (6/23/03) described the Hannity/Miller/Colmes line-up as "two rants, one runt."

The notion that Colmes plays second fiddle to Hannity is shared by television critics across the country. At least four papers (**Salt Lake City Tribune**, 6/21/03; **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**, 6/3/03; **Atlanta Journal and Constitution**, 10/12/96; **New York Times**, 10/10/96) have run articles referring to Colmes as Hannity's "sidekick."

Fellow liberals don't disagree. In his best selling *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, liberal comic Al Franken calls Colmes "a moderate milquetoast" and "a liberal on-air punching bag" and puts Colmes' name in tiny typeface in every reference to the show.

And though **Fox News** markets Colmes as "a hard-hitting liberal known for his electric commentary" (**FoxNews.com**), it doesn't even get much help from Colmes himself. "I think I'm quite moderate," Colmes blandly told **USA Today** (2/1/95), not long before being hired as the show's left-wing counterweight to Hannity.

Even **Fox News** owner Rupert Murdoch seems to have trouble making the case that Colmes is a clear-cut liberal. When asked at a congressional hearing last spring (5/8/03) to identify the liberals featured on the **Fox News Channel**, he offered "Alan Colmes for one." He added the name of **On the Record** host Greta Van Susteren--a liberal mainly because she used to work at the centrist **CNN**--before seeming to apologize: "You know, it's in the eye of the beholder, I guess."

"I voted for Giuliani"

Conceding points to conservatives and Republicans seems to be a Colmes specialty.

Following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, Colmes (9/28/01) assured former Republican congressman Susan Molinari that he'd voted for New York City's Republican mayor: "Hold on. Susan--Susan, look, I voted for Rudy Giuliani. I'm a liberal Democrat. I voted for this Republican, Rudy Giuliani." Reminding **Fox** viewers that he voted for Giuliani is a sort of Colmes on-air mantra; according to the show's transcripts, he's done it at least eight times since 1998.

Colmes sometimes joins his conservative co-host and guests in criticizing the left. When conservative author Tammy Bruce appeared on the show touting her book, *The Death of Right and Wrong: Exposing the Left's Assault on Our Culture and Values* (4/21/03), Hannity predictably agreed with the author about the blame for declining values: "But, literally, the left is responsible for this." Then Bruce clarified her point: "Well, as I show in the book...it's the left having gone so far to the left." Rather than putting up some kind of resistance to this left-bashing--as one might expect a left-of-center host to do--Colmes instead concurred: "I think in some respects you're right. And you and I have talked about this before."

While Hannity, a devout movement conservative, can be relied upon to dwell on the slightest conservative grievance, Colmes seems to see his role as one of policing liberal excess. When left-leaning New York City councilmember Charles Barron dubbed George W. Bush a "selected" president on the show (3/28/03), Colmes scolded the wayward leftist: "Look, my problem with my fellow liberals is they keep arguing the election of 2000. Let's move forward. If you want to win in the future, stop talking about the past."

Once appearing as a guest on **Fox's O'Reilly Factor** (4/11/03), Colmes received a figurative pat on the head from the show's host, Bill O'Reilly, for not criticizing the White House during the Iraq war. O'Reilly praised Colmes for his silence: "I put forth that once the shelling starts--and you did this--you kept quiet, OK." Colmes dutifully responded: "Well, look, I've kept quiet. My choice has been--I have not criticized the administration or this war effort while there are men and women in harm's way, and I will not, and that is my --that's a choice I make."

"I defended Trent Lott"

When Sen. Trent Lott (R.-Miss.) appeared on the **Hannity & Colmes** show (4/30/03) chiding Democrats for conducting a filibuster to stall confirmation of Bush judicial nominees, he got no argument from Colmes: "I agree with you. I don't think the Democrats should be doing that. I think they're viewed as obstructionist when they do that."

Colmes seems to have a special affinity for the conservative senator. When Lott stepped down as Senate majority leader in December 2002, after praising Senator Strom Thurmond's racist 1948 presidential campaign at Thurmond's 100th birthday party, guest Oliver North appeared

on the show to defend Lott (12/23/02). When North blamed "Alan and all of his colleagues" for Lott's downfall, Colmes corrected him: "By the way, Ollie, I defended Lott and said he should not have had to step down." When North responded, "Because you wanted him there so you could continue to kick him around," Colmes cited his own pattern of defending Lott: "Absolutely not. Absolutely untrue. You haven't been watching our show."

Similarly, when conservative radio host Laura Ingraham (1/22/03) charged that Lott had been "tarred and feathered...destroyed on the public forum," Colmes protested: "I defended him. I defended Trent Lott."

During one of Newt Gingrich's many appearances on **Hannity & Colmes** (7/24/03), Colmes thanked the former Republican House speaker profusely for writing a blurb for his upcoming book. It was nothing, Gingrich insisted: "You are my favorite liberal to argue with." And Gingrich isn't alone on the right. If Colmes remains largely a non-person in progressive circles, his tendency to concede points to the right and criticize the left make him the favorite liberal of many conservatives.

In addition to Gingrich, Colmes has won the praise of Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch ("you're great for a liberal"--4/16/01), Republican House Whip Tom DeLay ("you are my favorite liberal"--10/18/99), Christian right leader James Dobson ("he's my favorite liberal"--4/28/03) and, of course, Sen. Trent Lott ("you may be a liberal but you're one of the better ones I've seen on TV"--4/30/03).

"Lower forms of behavior"

If Colmes' fans are almost all on the opposite side of the spectrum, the same cannot be said about Sean Hannity. A popular figure in conservative movement circles, Hannity reportedly gets as much as \$10,000 per speech, his first book spent time near the top of national bestseller lists, and his radio show is one of the most listened-to in conservative talk radio, trailing only Rush Limbaugh's show in the ratings.

Before **Fox News**, Hannity's career included hosting a handful of confrontational talk radio shows in various states. He got his start in the late 1980s as a volunteer broadcaster at the University of California at Santa Barbara's **KCSB** radio station, where his tenure was revealing.

After airing for less than a year, Hannity's weekly show was canceled in 1989, when **KCSB** management charged him with "discriminating against gays and lesbians" after airing two shows featuring the book *The AIDS Coverup: The Real and Alarming Facts about AIDS* (**The Independent**, 6/22/89). Written by homophobic Christian-right activist Gene Antonio, the book crankily argued that AIDS could be spread by casual contact, including coughs, sneezes and mosquito bites. Antonio charged that the government, medical establishment and media covered up these truths in the service of "the homosexual movement."

When Antonio appeared by phone on one of the shows, Hannity and his guest repeatedly slurred gay men. At one point, according to the UCSB campus newspaper **The Daily Nexus** (5/25/89), Hannity declared: "Anyone listening to this show that believes homosexuality is a normal lifestyle has been brainwashed. It's very dangerous if we start accepting lower and lower forms of behavior as the normal." According to the campus paper, Antonio responded by calling gay men "a subculture of people engaged in deviant, twisted acts."

When a fellow **KCSB** broadcaster called the show to challenge the host and his guest, Hannity pointed out that the caller, a lesbian, had a child through artificial insemination, and Antonio dubbed the child a "turkey-baster baby." When the caller took issue with that "disgusting" remark, Hannity followed up with "I feel sorry for your child" (**The Independent**, 6/22/89; **KCSB**, 4/4/89).

Saved by the ACLU

Hannity challenged his dismissal with help from the Santa Barbara Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU Foundation of Southern California. The civil liberties groups wrote letters on Hannity's behalf, arguing that the state school was breaching his free speech. When **KCSB** relented, offering him his show back, Hannity held out for more airtime, walking away from the station when he didn't get it.

Hannity's own accounts of his time at **KCSB** have been selective and incomplete. A few years ago he summed up the experience to **Newsday** (7/12/99): "You work for free at a college station, where they spit on you and then they fire you." In his best-selling book, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty Over Liberalism*, Hannity wrote:

My first gig was with my own talk radio show at the University of Santa Barbara. But it didn't last long. I was too conservative, the higher-ups said, and they didn't like the comments one guest made on the show...The left-wing management had zero-tolerance for conservative points of view. And I was promptly fired. Once my voice was silenced, my destiny was set--do or die, I'd make my career in radio.

In this bit of personal mythmaking Hannity attributes his troubles at **KCSB** to his conservatism and to the behavior of a guest on his show. Both claims distort what actually happened, exonerating Hannity of any responsibility and casting him as a victim. Maybe that's the point. After all, accurately recounting the **KCSB** story, including his own hateful language and the inconvenient fact that he was offered his job back, might spoil the pristine image of the free-speech martyr Hannity wants us to believe.

Hannity's relentless application of ideology allows for few exceptions, none of the soft spots or quirks of the sort acquired over time when one's rigid beliefs are tempered by experience. So while one might expect Hannity to maintain at least a quiet gratitude toward the ACLU, it's surprising to see how ungenerous he is toward the group that supported him in Santa Barbara. For instance, in a discussion about free speech last year, Hannity charged Colmes with being "a card-carrying member of the ACLU." When Colmes said he that was proud to be a member, "because they defend all free speech," Hannity interrupted him: "No they don't, actually. But go ahead" (**Hannity & Colmes**, 7/17/02).

"Three Times a Liar"

Hannity's first big-city success in talk radio came on Atlanta's **WGST-AM**, where by all accounts he was no less confrontational than in California. African-American clergy groups, according to the **Atlanta Journal and Constitution** (9/15/95), charged **WGST** with spreading hatred on the airwaves, specifically citing Hannity's show. The paper reported (3/27/96) on Hannity's campaign to get "Oscar attendees to wear blue ribbons, in support of the L.A. police officers who beat Rodney King." Also according to the **Journal** (4/30/96), a blurb promoting Hannity on the **WGST** website touted him as "making a proud name for himself by insulting lesbians."

When Hannity reported to New York City in 1996 to begin work on what would become **Hannity & Colmes**, it wasn't long before he'd also landed an afternoon show on the biggest talk radio station in the country, New York City's **WABC-AM**.

On his **WABC** show, as with his earlier radio shows, "the left" and its various constituencies were blamed for the nation's problems; and crime, affirmative action, welfare and "illegitimacy," all talk radio staples, were discussed ceaselessly. But Hannity really distinguished himself with his crusading efforts to defend the police against charges of brutality. When Haitian immigrant Abner Louima accused New York City police officers of sodomizing and badly injuring him with a wooden rod in 1997, Hannity used his **WABC** show for a vicious counter-offensive targeting the victim.

The father of chief defendant Justin Volpe, an NYPD police officer, regularly appeared on show during the 1999 trial. And Hannity and various guests repeated rumors that Louima's injuries resulted from a "gay sex act" and not from police brutality. Playing on the homosexual rumor and inconsistencies in Louima's story, Hannity and his producer sang a parody of Lionel Richie's song "Three Times a Lady," changing the words to "you're once, twice, three times a liar." Hannity stopped referring to the victim as "Lying Louima" only after Volpe confessed to sodomizing Louima with the help of another officer (**OnePeoplesProject.com**).

Meanwhile, at **Hannity & Colmes**, the Louima story got somewhat less, and less sordid, play; Hannity only repeated the homosexual rumor once on the national cable show (5/13/99). But there, on national television, Hannity was gaining a reputation as a leading conservative advocate who could be depended on to echo and amplify the latest lines in conservative and Republican thinking.

The Elián switcheroo

While **Fox** has made Hannity an increasingly important mouthpiece for the right, Colmes remains little more than Hannity's foil on **Fox**. One story that seemed to bring this out was that of Elián Gonzalez, the five-year-old Cuban refugee who was rescued in November 1999 from the shark-infested waters off the coast of Florida that claimed his mother's life. The debate that developed on **Hannity & Colmes** over whether the child ought to be returned to his father in Cuba took some strange turns.

"Unless information comes out that he was a bad father or something, he has a right to his son. And we've got to honor that." That was Hannity's take on Elián Gonzalez in the first segment of the show dealing with the story (11/29/99). In the segment, Hannity agreed with one conservative guest who wanted the child returned to Cuba based on immigration law, and disagreed with another conservative guest, Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R.-Fla.), who represents Florida's Cuban-American community. Colmes downplayed the father's rights, siding with Diaz-Balart, who insisted that the child should stay in Florida: "What about the interests of the mother, who as was pointed out, gave her life so her child might find freedom in America?" It was a peculiar position for a liberal to take.

As the Elián saga dragged on, becoming all-important in Florida's anti-Castro community, it stretched into the political primaries of 2000, where most Republicans were hardening their anti-Castro rhetoric and calling for Elián to remain in the U.S..

By March 27, Hannity's pro-father position had begun to soften; on-air, he admitted to being "torn" between the father's right to raise his son and the son's right to "freedom." By late April, he'd completed the reversal; consonant with the Republican consensus, Hannity was demanding that Elián not be sent "back to slavery." This definitive turn-around happened during an April 26, 2000 segment again featuring Diaz-Balart.

While Hannity's position was shifting and he was acknowledging the shift on air, Colmes was changing his view too, but with virtually no explanation. On the same April 26, 2000 segment, putting aside earlier concerns about the child's "freedom," Colmes now polarized with Diaz-Balart, arguing for the father's rights: "But there's no mother, Mr. Congressman, there's only a father left."

Because Colmes did not discuss his switch, the reversal seemed to have no motivation other than to keep Colmes positioned as a sparring partner for Hannity. Unlike his partner, who speaks to and is respected by a conservative movement, Colmes appears to have no goal other than to maintain the illusion of debate on a univocal network.

"A liberal that is a cut above"

And that, in the end, is the job of **Hannity & Colmes**, a lopsided discussion of political issues between a forceful, connected conservative firebrand and an affable, accommodating subordinate. If the Harlem Globetrotters have the Washington Generals as their nightly fall guys, Sean Hannity has Alan Colmes. The notion that the two hosts are co-equals, fighting it out on a level playing field, cannot be supported by evidence, any more than the rest of **Fox's** daily offerings can be described as "fair and balanced."

One final example illustrates the role that Colmes plays in the world of right-wing journalism: When Rush Limbaugh came under fire and resigned from **ESPN** after saying that a highly regarded African-American football star was overrated by the media because he was black, Colmes ran to Limbaugh's defense (10/2/03). Colmes praised the conservative radio talker: "We in talk radio owe Rush a debt of gratitude, no matter what side we're on, because he made it possible for us to do what we do, liberal or conservative, because he paved the way for so many of us." Colmes said Limbaugh, a close friend of both Hannity and **Fox News** president Roger Ailes, was getting a bad rap, and defended him against charges that the remark was racist: "He wasn't making a racial comment. He was commenting on the media."

Colmes' homage to Limbaugh drew this response from Hannity: "I think what Alan Colmes did in the last segment of this program tonight and what he said about Rush Limbaugh shows why Alan is a liberal that is a cut above and a class act and why I'm proud to have him as a partner."

Hannity might have been speaking for **Fox News** in expressing his gratitude for Colmes' brilliant performance as the ultimate "Liberal to Be Determined."

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