

What if Limbaugh or Rove Anchored Fox's Presidential Coverage



Let's imagine that Rush Limbaugh gives up his radio job and is hired by Fox News as a political commentator.

No problem here. Rush is a smart guy and his opinions would be interesting and provocative.

Now let's imagine that Roger Ailes, who runs Fox News, decides that since Rush is immensely popular with viewers he ought to move on to bigger things beyond simply giving his opinions. So Ailes makes Limbaugh the anchor of Fox's lucrative morning news show, and has him do political interviews, and moderate debates, and anchor the channel's Sunday news program.

Anything big and political goes to Limbaugh. And a presidential election is looming, so Rush is going to be pretty busy deciding all sorts of things, like what gets covered and what doesn't and how stories are played on TV.

And when liberals complain, as they surely would, Limbaugh defends himself, saying: "I'm not a radio talk show host anymore. That's what I used to be. Now, I'm a serious journalist who is no longer a partisan."

After they stop laughing, it comes out that Mr. Non Partisan Honest Journalist gave \$75,000 to a foundation run by the conservative Koch brothers – a contribution to help further good causes, of course.

Except, Rush never told Fox News about the contribution and he never shared the information with his viewers – even after he grilled the liberal author of a book that was critical of the Koch brother's foundation. In that interview, Rush claimed that the author, who had worked in politics, was a partisan. What Rush *didn't* point out was that in addition to the hefty contribution he was still serving on various Koch Foundation panels. Oh yeah, the wife of one of the Koch brothers was running for president.

Rush's boss, Fox News, says what he did was nothing more than an "honest mistake." He apologized, Fox explained, so let's move along, nothing to see here. And yes, Rush would still be heading up Fox's presidential campaign coverage despite the fact that he's close to Mrs. Koch, who's running for president.

That, of course, would not satisfy liberals who would be calling for Limbaugh's head on a platter. They would accuse Fox of crimes against humanity. They wouldn't be satisfied to simply point out that what Limbaugh did violated fundamental journalistic ethics. They'd question not only his contribution, but also his very role as a journalist. On being a pundit, they'd grudgingly say, OK; objective journalist, never.

But even if Rush really did undergo some major transformation since he left radio, and somehow, miraculously, got rid of every last drop of his partisanship, he'd still make us wonder: Could this man who bludgeoned liberals day in and day out in his past life, could he really be fair to politicians who hold views with which he with passionately disagrees?

Who knows? Maybe he could be fair. But perceptions matter. And liberals, understandably, would perceive Limbaugh to be – at some level – what he always was – a take-no-prisoners political warrior.



And that's just how many of us perceive George Stephanopoulos.

He would always be the guy who ran the "War Room" and who would throw his own grandmother under the bus if it would benefit his boss, Bill Clinton.

If you think the Limbaugh analogy is a bridge too far, then consider this instead: Would ABC News have hired Karl Rove – who also was a political warrior who helped elect a president two times – to be its chief political reporter? Would ABC News allow him to moderate presidential debates and give him the job of anchor on its politically oriented Sunday news show? Would ABC let him lead the network's presidential campaign coverage if he not only worked for President Bush, but also gave big money to the former president's foundation? *Would they allow it if Laura Bush was running for president?*



Of course ABC News wouldn't. But why not? Like Stephanopoulos, Rove is smart. He also understands the intricacies of politics at the highest levels. The only significant difference between the two is that one is liberal and the other is conservative.

Or to put it another way: At ABC News (and the other networks) one is trusted to play fair and the other isn't.

If you're a liberal in the mainstream media, you fit right in. You're considered reasonable and moderate. If you're a conservative you're viewed with suspicion. You're seen as anything but reasonable or moderate. And that – more than Stephanopoulos' ill-advised \$75,000 contribution – is the real problem.

George Stephanopoulos' Contraception Fixation

✘ In last Saturday's GOP presidential debate, ABC News commentator George Stephanopoulos asked Mitt Romney an unusual question. He wanted to know if the former Massachusetts governor believed that states had the right to ban the use of contraception. When Romney voiced his opinion that the question was both odd and irrelevant since no states or candidates were interested in banning contraception, Stephanopoulos was persistent in trying to get the former Massachusetts governor to answer it. His repeated attempts prompted audible groans from the audience. In the end, Romney essentially denied Stephanopoulos whatever response he was hoping to evoke.

Now, it's pretty safe to say that the question was not posed due to genuine public interest in the topic. In fact, I would very much doubt that any of the candidates have fielded such a question while talking to voters. So, one might be wondering what Stephanopoulos was trying to get at. To me, it was fairly obvious. He was trying to get Romney's contraception

views on record, and he was doing it under the guise of states' rights so it wouldn't sound as obviously partisan. If Romney hadn't slapped down the question, I'm sure it would have been asked of the other candidates as well. Why does George care, or think anyone else cares? Well, he most likely doesn't. But putting forth such a question plays perfectly into a political strategy that the Democratic party found success in during the 2010 elections.

I wrote an entire column on this brainchild back in August, known to Democratic strategists as "The Colorado Model". The gist of the strategy is to highlight the personal, social beliefs of a rival candidate, form a narrative that the candidate plans on implementing those beliefs into policy if elected, and then promote that narrative with a concentrated, relentless media attack campaign on how that candidate is "too extreme".

The example I used was the U.S. Senatorial race here in Colorado between incumbent Michael Bennet (D) and challenger Ken Buck (R). Heading into the 2010 campaign, the political environment was looking just as good for conservatives here as it was throughout the rest of the country, thanks to the Tea Party uprising. But the tide began to turn once the Bennet campaign and outside groups focused their efforts almost entirely on the notion that Buck was "too extreme". They did this by running an almost endless barrage of commercials that cited his personal beliefs on gay marriage, abortion exceptions, and most notably... **contraception**. Buck never ran on any of those issues, yet they became the focus of the campaign. By election day, few were talking about Bennet's support of Obamacare and rest of the administration's unpopular policies. Instead, they were talking about Buck being "too extreme". This led to a narrow win for Bennet.

To my surprise, Buck actually read my column back in August and contacted me shortly after it had been posted to this site. We had a cordial conversation, and during it, he

mentioned that he had actually never expressed an opposition to contraception. I was stunned by that revelation, so I researched it. Sure enough, I couldn't find a single quote by him that even suggested it. It was apparently something that had merely been inferred by third-party, deductive reasoning and was never substantiated. Yet, it had been a key factor in the race.

With an issue so sensitive, it apparently doesn't take all that much to transform a mere assertion into an effective weapon... And George Stephanopoulos certainly recognizes that.

From a logical standpoint, I'm somewhat surprised that ABC News even allows Stephanopoulos to moderate Republican debates in the first place. Sure, I get it... He's no longer a professional political adviser for Bill Clinton and the Democratic party. He's now the charming commentator we see on television each morning, yucking it up with celebrities and presenting the news of the day. But something tells me that there'd be some serious criticism over the issue of objectivity if ABC News let Karl Rove moderate a Democratic debate. Really, what's the difference? Rove is still politically active, but so is George. The Politico reported in 2009 that Stephanopoulos conducts daily strategy chats with former colleagues Rahm Emanuel (Obama's chief of staff at the time), Paul Begala, and James Carville. If he's helping to shape the messaging of the Democratic party, why is he helping to shape the questioning at Republican debates?

I guess I've got to hand it to the Republican candidates for agreeing to participate in a debate moderated by a seasoned political opponent. It at least brought a little attention to how ideologically-driven the media really is. And that's always welcome.