

OUTLOOK

Commentary and Opinion

A Case of Kinsleyitis

Why Liberals Still Can't Compete With Conservatives in the TV Talk Show War

By David Shenk

"You could write your damn fingers off for 25 years and never have the same reach as television. Television is just a monster."

—Jack Germond

IT'S SUNDAY morning, the day of prayer, and Sam Donaldson is making his usual sacrificial offering. He's letting George Will tear liberalism to shreds on national television.

The show is ABC's "This Week with David Brinkley." The subject is violent crime. "Let's all agree it's intolerable," says Sam, the program's liberal trustee. He turns to challenge his right-wing adversary. "What's the *Will* plan to solve it?"

George is bemused. It's as if the waxy-haired, bow-tied king of TV punditry *hasn't* just spent several minutes articulating a rather comprehensive and extremely conservative set of solutions in a series of efficient, eloquent bursts. "I'm telling it," he replies, only too pleased to sketch it out again for an audience of 4 million: "More policemen, lots of policemen, better prisons, less lenient judges." Sam, meanwhile, has presented his radical plan to eliminate crime this way:

- *You say we have to do something about crime. Everyone would agree. What do we do about it?*
- *But I think when we talk about crime, whether you're a reporter or not, it seems to me we have to suggest what we do about it.*

See PUNDITS, C4, Col. 4

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Talk Wars: A Case of Kinsleyitis

PUNDITS, From C1

■ *Let's all agree it's intolerable. What's the Will plan to solve it?*

By the time Brinkley steps in to go to a commercial, George has made his case and then some, while Sam has made several entertaining but irrelevant references to block grant proposals, the "wrong" kind of caring and Uzis.

Oh well. After more than a decade of this pronounced imbalance, we on the left have come to expect and live with the frustration of watching George and his compatriots walk all over Sam and his. But this on-screen shift to the right was supposed to be a component of the Reagan Revolution. With Clinton now at the helm, isn't it fair to expect some sort of pundit dividend? Hasn't the moment arrived for "The Fallows Group," "Hitchens & Company" and "This Week with Hendrik Hertzberg?"

Dream on. The left is still losing television for several very good reasons, and will continue to do so until we seek help. *Hello, my name is Michael Kinsley. I'm an important liberal, and I'm just plain awful on television.* Before we make any real headway into the American mainstream, we're going to have to face down our own conceit and truly embrace television the way conservatives have for more than a dozen years.

Take Kinsley. This is our white television knight? While columnist Kinsley writes with unparalleled eloquence and precision, rightly earning him his reputation as the great liberal mind of our time, talking-head Kinsley unfortunately possesses TV skills a half-notch above those of Mike Dukakis (who was a hair better on television than Walter Mondale). Even after four years on CNN's "Crossfire," Kinsley hasn't picked up the TV ropes as his producers had hoped he would. He wins his share of substantive points, yes, but his civility, his affection for the finer points of policy and his lawyerly interrogative style are the antithesis of compelling television.

Kinsley: *Here's the problem: How can you say other countries should [intervene], but we're not going to do it? Why should they do it if we're not going to do it? . . . You're essentially saying, we will supply money, we will supply advice, other countries will supply the combat troops, and the question be-*

TV, while neoconservative presidential aspirant and former quarterback Jack Kemp has taken to the idiot box with gusto? Is this why kind, gentle Richard Gephardt is far outclassed by Republican pugilist Newt Gingrich?

"Its carnivorous confrontational style makes riveting viewing," London's Independent recently wrote of the conservative-stacked "McLaughlin Group." Cons don't have a corner on nastiness, of course, but for whatever reason, they have on the whole displayed a greater willingness to draw rhetorical blood on TV.

If, from Dinesh D'Souza to Rush Limbaugh, emissaries from the right seem at home under a 3-kilowatt Toto key light, it's because most of them have been to TV school.

"Conservatives really did study the medium to figure out how to bust through," says David Keene, president of the American Conservative Union. "They have collectively been more single-minded about it." A few years after Ronald Reagan capped a 40-year career in front of the camera by taking the presidential oath, the Heritage Foundation became the first think tank to install its own TV studio. Even in the midst of the burgeoning think-tank class, where it was said that "Ideas Move Nations," there arose a Reagan corollary: "National TV Moves Everything."

The Reagans made no secret of their affection for George Will and several other conservatives pundits, whose inside access in turn made them invaluable on the pundit circuit. While Reagan was in office, it seemed at times that there was a virtual partnership between the White House and the right-wing pundit industry. So far, there are no analogous overtures from "our" White House. Clinton, famously unsympathetic to the press, seems oblivious to the opportunity he's passing up. In the TV age, presidents install not just Cabinet secretaries and Supreme Court justices, but TV pundits as well. Sidney Blumenthal, call your office.

Southpaw pundits can also help themselves, of course; they might start by closing the Slouch Gap, the Rumbled Suit Gap and the Disheveled Hair Gap. Two weeks ago, in a "MacNeil/Lehrer" piece on Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Bruce Shapiro, from the liberal Nation Institute, gave a sharp and thoughtful critique of her judicial career. Clearly, he'd taken a fine-tooth comb over Ginsburg's record in preparation for his interview with Charlayne Hunter-Gault. Unfortunately, Shapiro had neglected to drag a comb over his hair for at least three days. Even a sympathetic viewer had a hard time getting around his rainforest coif.

At lunch, it doesn't matter. On the street, who cares? But in a tight shot under the lights, the slightest rumple proves a disabling distraction. His quote about the power of TV notwithstanding, Jack Germond's signature slouch on "McLaughlin" is emblematic of his unwillingness to adapt to TV and embrace it as the political medium of our times.

McLaughlin: *Will the United States go the way of Britain, France and Germany most recently in enacting new laws to restrict our immigration policy? We're—here we're talk-*





BY ROB SHEPPERSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

comes, in any circumstance, why should other countries do it if we're not going to do it?

Not to mention his croaky voice, his perpetually raised eyebrows and his insincere camera-prompter narrations. It's uncomfortable to watch. By contrast, Pat Buchanan, his nightly opponent, is someone who understands that television doesn't reward graciousness or litigation. Buchanan is visceral, evocative, absolute. He plays to win the television moment, not the legal argument.

Buchanan: *Look, nobody wants to see starving children, and actually I would have gone along with a U.N. intervention in there to help those starving children. But in Sudan, they're starving at 10 times the rate they are in Somalia . . . The Christians and the pagans in the south are being massacred, and we're not doing anything there. The only reason we're in Somalia and not in Liberia or Zaire or Angola or Sudan is the fact that camera crews went there . . . and the American troops followed the cameras. I mean, the point is, terrible things are happening all over the world.*

Kinsley's predecessor on "Crossfire," Tom Braden, was also remarkably untelevision. So is "Inside Washington's" Carl Rowan. So is most of Brookings. By contrast, Fred Barnes, Kinsley's conservative New Republic comrade who has become a "McLaughlin Group" regular, is confident, crisp, plain-spoken. McLaughlin himself, an old Nixonite-cum-Reaganite, has the loudest roar but also a self-effacing charm. Robert Novak is utterly charmless but is effective nonetheless with his unrelenting *I-don't-need-to-be-liked* approach. Scores of other conservatives, from U.S. News & World Report's Mort Zuckerman to Nixon's Kissinger, have also made seamless transitions to TV punditry.

Oh sure, you'd much rather be stuck in an elevator with Kinsley or Jack Germond or Richard Cohen. But as Ted Koppel explained in an interview several years ago, good TV is not about being nice. Why is Koppel a TV star? Because, he's able to locate what he calls "points of vulnerability" in order to "[get] you off balance. That's when I'd move in," Koppel told the New York Times Magazine. "That's when I'd hit you with two or three hard ones." ("So that's what it's like to be a guest on 'Nightline,'" observed the writer, Marshall Blonsky. "It is a breakthrough, not of communication, but of aggression.")

Aggression, not communication: Does this help explain why neoliberal presidential aspirant Gary Hart, a self-professed "man of new ideas," was never very convincing on

ing about policy, not enforcement. I ask you, Freddie.

Barnes: *In the long run, yes.*

McLaughlin: *What do you think?*

Clift: *I think the laws are going to be updated, and they need to be.*

McLaughlin: *Jack?*

Germond: *I have no idea, to tell you the truth.*

While his candor and reluctance to perform as a political circus animal are charming, this detached quality is also what keeps Germond from really winning many television moments.

That leaves it to Eleanor Clift, one of the few regular pundits to aggressively defend the basic tenets of liberalism, and do so with panache. ("I don't understand why people who want to express their religion have to do it in a public setting. I think God hears private prayers as well.") The problem is, she's way outnumbered. Mark Shields is also outstanding, but he's more a horse-race analyst than an advocate. Chris Matthews holds his own. But none of these folks has the power to set the topic ("Issue one: The tax man cometh") or the power of the last word ("The answer is: inexperience at the White House").

Rumples and quip-impairment aside, though, there may be other, less perceptible forces behind lopsided TV. "It may be that liberals are not so doctrinaire," suggests "Nightline" producer Richard Harris. "There's so little flexibility in the minds of some of these conservatives that they come on very strong."

"Progressives want to have faith in the unknown," offers Mark Sugg, director of TV operations for the (leftist) Center for Defense Information, "whereas conservatives worry about the reality of things they're trying to *conserve*. It's much easier to defend the known than to make a case for progress."

Others are convinced it's just a simple matter of arithmetic. "The people who are trotted out as liberals are not liberals," says Micah Sifry, associate editor of the Nation, referring to political balance-beam artists like Roll Call's Mort Kondracke, Newsweek's Evan Thomas, Chicago Tribune's Clarence Page and the Wall Street Journal's Al Hunt and Alan Murray. Even Kinsley, insists Sifry: "From the left, Mike Kinsley—give me a break."

Given the chance, Sifry says, *true* progressives would not only even the score; they'd shoot out ahead. "Any show that [Christopher] Hitchens is a part of, he dominates—and that's why he's not invited back. In the '80s, he'd get invited on these shows, and he'd keep winning the arguments, and then people like Elliott Abrams started saying 'I'm not going on the show if Hitchens is on.' And the programs backed down."

It sounds plausible, until Sifry lets you in on the *other* reason Hitchens isn't invited back. "Producers will tell you that Hitchens is a bad boy, that he made fun of Charleton Heston's toupee on the air. And he did. He shows up without a tie. Hitchens knows the rules of TV, and he deliberately breaks them."

My point exactly.