

October 2, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Wizard of Beck

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Let us take a trip back into history. Not ancient history. Recent history. It is the winter of 2007. The presidential primaries are approaching. The talk jocks like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity and the rest are over the moon about Fred Thompson. They're weak at the knees at the thought of Mitt Romney. Meanwhile, they are hurling torrents of abuse at the unreliable deviationists: John McCain and Mike Huckabee.

Yet somehow, despite the fervor of the great microphone giants, the Thompson campaign flops like a fish. Despite the schoolgirl delight from the radio studios, the Romney campaign underperforms.

Meanwhile, Huckabee surges. Limbaugh attacks him, but social conservatives flock.

Along comes New Hampshire and McCain wins! Republican voters have not heeded their masters in the media. Before long, South Carolina looms as the crucial point of the race. The contest is effectively between Romney and McCain. The talk jocks are now in spittle-flecked furor. Day after day, whole programs are dedicated to hurling abuse at McCain and everybody ever associated with him. The jocks are threatening to unleash their angry millions.

Yet the imaginary armies do not materialize. McCain wins the South Carolina primary and goes on to win the nomination. The talk jocks can't even deliver the conservative voters who show up at Republican primaries. They can't even deliver South Carolina!

So what is the theme of our history lesson? It is a story of remarkable volume and utter weakness. It is the story of media mavens who claim to represent a hidden majority but who in fact represent a mere niche — even in the Republican Party. It is a story as old as “The Wizard of Oz,” of grand illusions and small men behind the curtain.

But, of course, we shouldn't be surprised by this story. Over the past few years the talk jocks have demonstrated their real-world weakness time and again. Back in 2006, they threatened to build a new majority on anti-immigration fervor. Republicans like J.D. Hayworth and Randy Graf, both of Arizona, built their House election campaigns under that banner. But these two didn't march to glory. Both lost their campaigns.

In 2008, after McCain had won his nomination, Limbaugh turned his attention to the Democratic race. He commanded his followers to vote in the Democratic primaries for Hillary Clinton because “we need Barack Obama bloodied up politically.” Todd Donovan of Western Washington University has looked at data from 38 states and could find no strong evidence that significant numbers of people actually did what Limbaugh commanded. Rush blared the trumpets, but few of his Dittoheads advanced.

Over the years, I have asked many politicians what happens when Limbaugh and his colleagues attack. The story is always the same. Hundreds of calls come in. The receptionists are miserable. But the numbers back home do not move. There is no effect on the favorability rating or the re-election prospects. In the media world, he is a giant. In the real world, he's not.

But this is not merely a story of weakness. It is a story of resilience. For no matter how often their hollowness is exposed, the jocks still reweave the myth of their own power. They still ride the airwaves claiming to speak for millions. They still confuse listeners with voters. And they are aided in this endeavor by their enablers. They are enabled by cynical Democrats, who love to claim that Rush Limbaugh controls the G.O.P. They are enabled by lazy pundits who find it easier to argue with showmen than with people whose opinions are based on knowledge. They are enabled by the slightly educated snobs who believe that Glenn Beck really is the voice of Middle America.

So the myth returns. Just months after the election and the humiliation, everyone is again convinced that Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity and the rest possess real power. And the saddest thing is that even Republican politicians come to believe it. They mistake media for reality. They pre-emptively surrender to armies that don't exist.

They pay more attention to Rush's imaginary millions than to the real voters down the street. The Republican Party is unpopular because it's more interested in pleasing Rush's ghosts than actual people. The party is leaderless right now because nobody has the guts to step outside the rigid parameters enforced by the radio jocks and create a new party identity. The party is losing because it has adopted a radio entertainer's niche-building strategy, while abandoning the politician's coalition-building strategy.

The rise of Beck, Hannity, Bill O'Reilly and the rest has correlated almost perfectly with the decline of the G.O.P. But it's not because the talk jocks have real power. It's because they have illusory power, because Republicans hear the media mythology and fall for it every time.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 2, 2009

An earlier version of this column referred to the House re-election campaigns of J. D. Hayworth and Randy Graf. However, while J. D. Hayworth served six terms in the House before his defeat, Randy Graf was never elected.