



Rush Limbaugh and the Hypocrisy Smokescreen

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The Center for American Progress' "Bill Bennett Hypocrisy" award went to a most deserving recipient this week, Rush Limbaugh. Until last week, Limbaugh was in the service of two masters, playing both the mighty trumpeter for the army of interests waging the costly and devastating war on drugs, and also apparently playing the junkie who scored black market drugs in the service of his need for a fix. The ontradiation uncovered by the revelation of Limbaugh's addiction is breathtaking: perched safely away from the mass policing and incarceration of millions of Americans, Limbaugh sneered at the ruinous consequences of the war on drugs, particularly for people of color. Fairness, he blustered, did not require reductions in the incarceration of people of color, but rather an increase in the incarceration of whites who, all too often, get away with illegal drug use.

Of course no one should hold their breath waiting for Limbaugh or his supporters to submit to Limbaugh's edict. In fact, one can almost imagine Limbaugh morphing into that old Saturday Night Live character—Jon Lovitz's pathological liar: "Yeah, that's the ticket, I'm for incarcerating all white drug users too....No wait, forget about what I just said--- that's not what I meant—what I meant to say was, uh..."

Anyone expecting that Limbaugh or his apologists would lay down their arms and take up Limbaugh's call for the incarceration of white drug abusers like himself, or better yet, call for a dramatic overhaul of American drug policy, is in for a rude awakening. Not only do his supporters refuse to confront the counterproductive consequences of this war and its obvious race and class-based double standards, they've turned hypocrisy into their own rallying cry. With appalling chutzpa, the conservative choir has excused Limbaugh's hypocrisy while simultaneously accusing "liberals and the media" of either themselves doing drugs or defending those who do. Indeed, according to the warped logic of one of his most vocal supporters, Limbaugh's hypocrisy is acceptable in large part because of the media's hypocrisy. As conservative pundit Matt Drudge declared recently on MSNBC's *Buchanan and Press* "There's no law against being a hypocrite a few times in your life and this industry is built on hypocrisy...I'm challenging the media tonight to empty their pockets."

Drudge's defense of Limbaugh is taken directly out of the Right's playbook: "When caught red-handed living a lie, deflect attention from your personal responsibility and shoot one directly across the bow of those perpetual evil-doers, 'the liberals and the media.'" This is classic misdirection, the key to the success of generations of politicians and charlatans for whom smoke and mirrors have always been a stock in trade. And it works. At best, the misdirection is entirely exculpatory; at minimum, the public is stymied and confused. When the public discussion over the "war on drugs" degenerates into a debate over who's the bigger hypocrite, Limbaugh and his apologists have effectively won.

Worst still is the effect that this paralyzing defense has on the ability of those who want to use this moment to build momentum toward a saner drug policy. Unable to figure out how to slam this slow, fat pitch out of the park, critics of the current drug policies have resorted to articulating mushy calls for compassion for Limbaugh.

Limbaugh's camp has to be relieved—indeed ecstatic--that the so-called "liberals and media" are squandering this moment to voice support for what is essentially a foregone conclusion. The reality is that Limbaugh is unlikely to serve any jail time for his illegal drug use for reasons that everyone in the anti-incarceration movement knows.

Conservatives have little to worry about so long as their opponents can't make more hay out of moments like these. What needs to be captured is that this inhumane drug policy can be sustained only so long as it visits its most heinous consequences upon society's most disempowered. If political elites like the Limbaughs and Bushes of the world had to suffer the devastating penalties for drug use that hundreds of thousands of nameless others face on a daily basis, this drug war would come to a halt in short order. What is needed now, it seems, is less "...and neither should you be incarcerated, Rush" and more hard-hitting analysis uncovering why the Limbaughs of the world are less likely to have their lives destroyed by

draconian drug laws.

That analysis might begin in the conservative dug-out with their shockingly disparate sentiments of concern and support for the likes of Limbaugh, and their hardened, condemnatory attitudes toward the drug dependency of members of out-groups. Pat Buchanan and Matt Drudge's homage to Limbaugh's ability to triumph in the face of such a debilitating dependency typifies the tendency of people to "feel the pain" of those like them, while condemning those unlike them to the most punitive treatment conceivable. Perhaps this selectivity is typical for all groups, but it is especially pronounced when the in-group and out-groups are defined by race and class. When members of their own group falter, people tend to attribute the cause to circumstances largely beyond their control. In Limbaugh's case, the cause was debilitating back pain. But with regard to out-groups, their "criminal" behavior is read not as circumstantial, but as the product of inherent characteristics so deeply entrenched that they must be rooted out through unyieldingly punitive measures.

One needn't work hard to find the bias reflected in the wagon-circling around Limbaugh. Says Matt Drudge on MSNBC, "(i)t makes me want to reach out to him and say we love you Rush, we know you are going through terrible hell..." Of course, anyone going through drug addiction is going through terrible hell, but the magnitude of drug addiction faced by others is rarely if ever addressed by the likes of Buchanan or Drudge. To Pat Buchanan, the fact that Limbaugh would risk his entire career under the weight of this addiction simply reveals how devastating drug dependency can be. "He must have known these things were damaging his hearing his whole career. He's the king of talk radio, everything is on the line. (I)t suggests a really hellish addiction, does it not?"

Of course, the fact that millions of others face this addiction, and confront ever decreasing opportunities to rid themselves of it has not tempered the conservative support for the war on drugs. And if one wanted to press conservatives about their drumbeat of personal responsibility and choice, it's not too far off track to remind them that Limbaugh, unlike millions of others, had resources and the opportunity to seek treatment for his addiction. If there is any culpability to go around, shouldn't it attach to those, like Limbaugh, who have been bested by their addiction despite treatment, yet who continue the drumbeat for mass incarceration for those who have had no such opportunity?

Given the ability of wealthy and well-connected people like Limbaugh to secure their own treatment and escape punishment, there will be little pressure to make treatment and other non-criminal interventions available for ordinary Americans most threatened by today's drug laws. In all likelihood, Rush will return, rehabilitated politically, if not physically, and this sorry chapter will fade into distant memory. Like the limited fall-out from his magnificent disintegration on ESPN, little structural or political change will come from the public's glimpse into the race and class disparities that prop up Limbaugh and the prevailing conventions around race, class and drugs. To engender this kind of change, we must use Limbaugh's story to expose the injustices and racist double standards -- obfuscated by the hypocrisy smokescreen -- that constitute the "war on drugs."

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