
Talk Radio: Is It Good for the Soul of the Nation?

John Fund

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The author of *Cleaning House: America's Campaign for Term Limits*, Fund has been called the Tom Paine of the modern congressional reform movement. He collaborated with Rush Limbaugh on Limbaugh's best-selling book titled *The Way Things Ought to Be*.

In an introduction to Fund's October 1998 American Experiment speech, co-moderator Vin Weber noted that a poll taken after the 1994 election showed that the most intensely committed Republican voters got most of their news from talk radio, while the Democrats got theirs from National Public Radio. No great surprise, Weber said, that when the Republicans took control of Congress, they attempted to reduce NPR funds, asked Rush Limbaugh to lead their new-member orientation session, and made Limbaugh an honorary member of that year's class of freshman members of Congress. Similarly, said Weber, Democrats have dramatized what they see as the pernicious effects of talk radio on the American political process.

Fund began by talking about his work for syndicated columnist Robert Novak, who spoke at an American Experiment event a few months earlier (see *American Experiment Quarterly*, Winter 1998–99).

I'm known for having a sharp pen, but it's nothing compared to Bob Novak's. I'll never forget the lessons I learned when I was his reporter.

One day, Bob was promised a secret internal Treasury Department memo on the latest tax increase that Richard Darman, who was the nemesis of Reagan conservatives in President Ronald Reagan's administration, was planning. Bob's column deadline was 4:30 in the afternoon, and he was promised the memo by 2:00. He was all geared up to write about it that day, and he had no backup.

Two o'clock, no memo. He put in a call to his source, somewhere in the bowels of the administration, and the source said, "I've had second thoughts. If I give you the memo, somebody somewhere is going to figure out it came from me. I can't give it to you."

Bob swallowed hard and said, "I've got to go. I'll call you back," and hung up. He came into my cubicle and said, "John, come into my office. You are about to learn how Washington sometimes works." I walked into his office, and he stood in front of me and started hyperventilating. His neck muscles bulged and his face turned beet red. He turned to his secretary and said, "Get that guy on the phone." I got on the extension.

"A madman just told me that the memo wasn't going to be delivered. I realize this must be an impostor. Where is the memo?"

The source, taken aback by Bob's new tone, said, "Well, as I explained, I can't really give it to you."

Novak proceeded to lacerate him. I

could hear the fellow shrinking into himself, and his voice became ever more plaintive and squeaky, and finally Bob said, "So, do you have anything to say?"

"Not really," the fellow said.

Then Bob moved in for the kill. "So, why aren't you giving it to me?"

"Well, Bob, I had to do what I had to do."

"You had to do what you had to do. You know, throughout history, people have said that. I'm sure that is what Judas Iscariot said to Christ on the cross. I'm sure that is what Benedict Arnold said to George Washington. I had to do what I had to do. Hell, I'm sure that is what Hitler must have said to the Jews. Well, I just have one thing more to tell you."

"What's that?"

"I've been in Washington for twenty-five years, and I've learned that there are only two kinds of people in this town: sources and targets. Which do you want to be?"

Before the fellow could respond, Novak hung up. He was immediately calm and collected. I was stunned. I turned to him and asked what would happen next.

"We wait fifteen, maybe twenty minutes."

Sure enough, twenty minutes later a motorcycle messenger arrived with the memo.

I assure you that I have never had to go quite that far in getting a story, but the technique is always in reserve, just in case.

Speakers traditionally tell their audiences why they are happy to speak to them. I actually have three reasons.

One is this: I suspect that many of you are Wall Street Journal readers or subscribers, and I thank you for helping pay my salary. Unlike a lot of journalists, I actually remember who I work for. It is not for myself. It is not for my ideology. It is not for the things I believe in. It is actually for the readers of the paper.

Second, I am proud to be associated with any group that includes Mitch Pearlstein, Vin Weber, and Tim Penny. There are times when editorial writers actually find people worthy of admiration. Vin and Tim acquitted themselves well when they were in Congress, and they have proved that there is life after Congress.

The third reason is that Minnesota is in the forefront of what I consider truly progressive politics, including school choice.

The End of the Insider Monopoly

Talk radio has both a bad rap and a good rap. It is very hard to paint with a broad brush. I'm here not to defend talk radio, but to explain it. It is a dynamic new means of communication that can be used for good or for ill, for trivial or for substantive pursuits.

New forms of communication have tremendous potential to effect social change. We have seen examples of new technology in action, from samizdat publications in the old Soviet empire to the fax messages used by the Chinese students protesting at Tiananmen Square to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty broadcasting behind the Iron Curtain. We have seen many examples

of how the spread of information is the enemy of tyranny, totalitarianism, and established social orders.

In this country, we have never had to deal with totalitarianism, but we have had to deal with communication monopolies. Think about this: In 1965, not too long ago, we had three major national television networks. We had three major newsmagazines: Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report. We had three—perhaps only two—national newspapers of any real significance, and only one, the Wall Street Journal, was truly circulating nationally. The Associated Press was there too, of course, with relatively homogenized news. If you weren't in that small, monopolistic, oligopolistic circle, you really didn't get your message out.

That has all changed. Instead of three major networks, we now have a gazillion cable channels, including three twenty-four-hour news channels. In many major cities, there is a twenty-four-hour channel just for local news. Magazines have proliferated, and the Internet brings many of them to your doorstep for free. This has meant a tremendous increase in information.

This also means that it is much harder for Washington insiders, both journalists and politicians, to play their insider game. The noted economist John Kenneth Galbraith once explained how the closed information loop in Washington works: Politicians and journalists go to the same cocktail parties, where politicians pontificate about what they are thinking and doing. Journalists note it all down,

then go back to their offices and write about it. Sometimes they attribute what they write to the politicians and sometimes, to appear more important and more informed themselves, they simply put it all in their own words. The politicians read the newspaper or listen to a broadcast and marvel at the extent to which they are in sync with public opinion. It is a complete feedback loop.

Galbraith said this was the only closed system for the recirculation of garbage known to man.

That closed system is still with us, but it has broken down because there are so many new outlets, talk radio among them. Ten years ago, talk radio was a format in only 300 stations coast to coast. Now it is a format in 1,300 stations. The biggest change, of course, is technology. The cost of satellite broadcasting has gone down by a factor of about thirty, so now the smallest talk radio station in, say, Fargo, North Dakota, can have national speakers talking to them from Washington or New York or Los Angeles or anywhere. This is remarkable: it means that almost every journalist on talk radio has access to the finest thinkers and elected officials.

That is the good that can come from talk radio. But talk radio is not news, and it shouldn't be judged as news. It deals with news, but it is driven by entertainment values, by ratings. Let's be honest: newspapers are also driven by commercial desires, but perhaps not to quite the same extent. The feedback is not quite as instantaneous.

Questioning Conventional Wisdom

Talk radio is driven by entertainment values, so it is difficult to get some subjects that merit public attention on talk radio because the ratings don't follow. You are not likely to hear about the search for a cancer cure or esoteric budget distinctions.

At the same time, while talk radio sometimes trivializes its subject matter, it also can posit a necessary and important counterpoint to the conventional wisdom of the established media. Let me give you an example. Can you name a single editorial board in this country, a single major network, a single major establishment media outlet that does not support the Common Cause model of campaign finance reform? With the exception of my own editorial board, I have yet to discover one.

Almost everyone agrees that there is too much money in politics, that we have to restrict the flow of money, even below the \$1,000 contribution limit we now have, which hasn't been indexed for inflation for twenty-four years. Everyone agrees that special interests drive politics, that we need to reduce the flow of money in politics.

In a perfect world, I would agree. But we are a democracy. We have something called the First Amendment, and we also have information costs, and candidates have to be able to get their own message out. Unless we are going to dragoon the broadcast networks into giving free time to every candidate, people are going to have to raise and spend money for ads.

Implicit in the conventional media model, which is almost universal, is that this is the good government model. This is what every person who believes in truth, justice, and fairness in politics should believe in.

That may or may not be true, but there is also a hidden agenda here—an agenda that a lot of people in the media implicitly understand and recognize. If you restrict further the amount of money in politics, if you restrict the flow of information the candidates can put out using their own resources, you enhance somebody else's power. Something always fills a vacuum. Say you have 100 units of information provided by politicians in paid advertising. If you reduce that, somebody will fill that information vacuum. That somebody is—surprise—the conventional media.

I am actually arguing against my own self-interest here. If politicians have fewer dollars with which to put their own message out through conventional paid advertising, guess whose power is enhanced? Mine, and that of my brethren in the media. Of course, I think it would be a wonderful thing if politicians had to bow and scrape before our editorial boards. It would enhance our editorial significance. An editorial endorsement would mean more. It would be wonderful for me to have a monopoly on the information you get about candidates, because, of course, I never distort anything, I am always fair, I always provide balanced views, I do not have a hidden agenda, and I have no prejudices, predilections, or ideological certainties.

That is an unspoken aspect of the conventional Common Cause model of campaign finance reform that you never hear. Even though you may not like those thirty-second spots, at least they are information. If you reduce that flow of information, you enhance the power of the people making the argument for it. You never hear that except on talk radio, and you hear it there partly for commercial reasons: talk radio makes money from political advertisements, so you will hear some counterpoints to the conventional view of how we need to reform our campaign finance laws. That is an advantage of a media monopoly being broken down by the discussion that is possible on talk radio.

Talk radio has brought to the fore a lot of issues that have been ignored by the conventional media. A few years ago, I was active in the campaign on the discharge petition in Congress. Bills could be bottled up by the Rules Committee forever; if the Rules Committee did not want bills to get to the floor of the House of Representatives, they simply died. The only other way to get a bill to the floor is through a discharge petition: a majority of the members sign up with the desk clerk of the House and demand that the bill be discharged—taken away from the Rules Committee and sent to the floor.

As soon as a particular bill was creeping up to the required 218 votes, the congressional leadership would simply say to some members, You really should take your name off the petition; this wouldn't be good for your career or your

other bills. And sure enough, very few bills passed the discharge petition threshold. Since it was a secret process, no one ever knew for sure who capitulated.

Congressman James Inhofe of Oklahoma decided that the names should be made public; the public should know at least as much as the congressional leadership about what was going on. This campaign started with talk radio, was run by talk radio, and finished with talk radio. No other broadcast outlet—ABC, NBC, CBS, even CNN—did a single story on it. The Wall Street Journal and a couple of other newspapers played a role, but it was basically talk radio.

The discharge petition is a device that initially was pushed by conservatives, but others have found it useful too. A campaign finance reform bill that embodied many of the restrictions I just argued against was brought to the House floor in large part because of the discharge petition—which is all to the good, since these devices are not for the use of one party or one ideology alone.

Opening Up the Discussion

Regardless of what the issue is, talk radio has often been the vehicle for bringing up issues outside the conventional media spectrum. Unusual candidates have benefited, and ultimately so have the voters who have to judge their qualifications. I suspect that much of [Minnesota governor] Jesse Ventura's early support came through talk radio; he probably didn't get much attention from traditional outlets until later in his gubernatorial campaign.

Studies of talk radio show that it is not a conservative monolith. The hosts can be broadly categorized as one-third quasi-liberal, one-third hard-shell conservative, and one-third populist. There is no domination of one ideology over another in talk radio, although diversity of opinion does not guarantee equality of results. Most of the top radio talk show hosts of national stature—Rush Limbaugh, Michael Reagan, G. Gordon Liddy—tend to the conservative side of the spectrum, but that's driven by the audience. The audience is often made up of refugees from conventional establishment wisdom. And of course there are exceptions.

Talk radio has opened up discussion of many issues. I've talked mostly about national issues, but there are also local concerns that are ignored by local papers because the papers have advertisers' interests at heart, or simply because they have a conventional view of things. Talk radio offers coverage of those important topics.

The noted liberal writer Susan Sontag made a controversial speech to an elite group of intellectuals in New York City about fifteen years ago, at the height of the debate about Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative and his approach to the Soviet Union. Sontag opposed Reagan's approach, but she said that he had been right about the nature of communism far more than many of the people in her audience, and the publications that Ronald Reagan read—Reader's Digest, Human Events, National Review—had far more accurate information about the Soviet

Union and its intentions and way of life than *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*.

Let's be intellectually honest, Sontag said. We believe in the free flow of information. We should not automatically dismiss these publications because, in the cold light of day, on one of the most important issues of our time—the nature of the Soviet Union—they were right and we were ill informed.

You can imagine what her audience's response was, but this was a very fundamental point.

What the Major Media Miss

Talk radio brings to our attention many things the conventional media don't cover. Let me give you just a couple of examples. The current scandals in Washington are relevant because one of the things we have learned is that the 1992 Clinton campaign mantra, "It's the economy, stupid," was, shall we say, an inadequate representation of what we should be concerned about in selecting a president. We are going to learn in the year 2000 that character does indeed count; character will be a very important issue in the election. But in 1992 we were told over and over again that character was not important.

The liberal journalist Hendrik Hertzberg of *The New Yorker* traveled in the press bus for the New Hampshire primary. That was when Bill Clinton was hit with the draft-dodging story, the Gennifer Flowers story, and the marijuana story, and he survived all of them. Hertzberg wondered how that could be,

so he took a poll of his fellow reporters on the bus: Who did they want for president? He listed ten names: Democrats, Republicans, Ross Perot.

Forty-seven of the forty-eight journalists on the bus checked Bill Clinton. So they gave him cover. They decided that whatever his transgressions of the 1960s, they probably had done some of the same things, so they gave him a pass—a generational character pass. I can understand that on a human level, but as journalists they abdicated their responsibility, and now look what we have. A mess!

Regardless of who you blame, Bill Clinton or Ken Starr, it is a mess, and its origin is in the fact that we didn't pay sufficient attention to character. People came forward with information about Bill Clinton's character in 1992. They managed to get through the screen of intimidation that Clinton's private detectives erected to try to prevent people from talking to the media.

One person who broke through that screen was Gennifer Flowers. Not a particularly attractive person in terms of her motives, but she had information. No one would listen to her. She was called a liar. We now know, from the president's own deposition, that she was telling the truth. Gennifer Flowers got on talk radio. Otherwise, except for a brief news conference sponsored by a tabloid, she was ignored and dismissed. Who was right? Who was wrong? Who was willing to give her a forum, and who wasn't? Was it relevant information? Most of us didn't think so in 1992. Most of us have to think so now.

Another example: Gary Aldrich, a former FBI agent assigned to the White House, who came forward in 1996 with a book about security problems at the White House. There were one or two lamentable lapses in that book, things that were described in a speculative manner that shouldn't have been, but essentially the book was 300 pages of facts and firsthand observations about White House security problems. Gary Aldrich was trashed. George Stephanopoulos went on ABC's *This Week* with David Brinkley, a show that he now works for as a paid commentator, trashed the book, trashed Gary Aldrich, and said that none of it had ever happened. Later he boasted, "We killed the book."

Well, not quite. The book sold 600,000 copies, largely through 1,000 interviews on talk radio. Was there one story on Gary Aldrich after that initial burst of publicity? Was there one story on the substance of the book—the security concerns—on ABC, NBC, or CBS, or in the *New York Times*? No. Nothing, zero. It existed only in a thousand interviews on talk radio.

Two years later, we revisit the story. We now know that at the time Gary Aldrich's book was published, an incredible collection of people were wandering into the White House for fund-raising dinners and Lincoln bedroom sleepovers: Ukranian mafia figures, convicted drug felons, convicted drug dealers, Chinese arms merchants—in fact, a Chinese arms merchant whose company had been caught shipping a thousand AK-47s to Los Angeles street gangs. An amazing

breakdown of security.

We now have a report from the General Accounting Office, the watchdog of Congress, on White House security procedures. The report lays out the fact that people do not get background checks, do not get security checks. People have indiscriminate access to classified information in the White House. There is still, after six years, a complete breakdown of security procedures at the White House.

What was the White House's response? A form letter that said the GAO had "the false impression that the security procedures in place are lax and inconsistent with established standards. We respectfully disagree." No evidence to refute the charges.

Gary Aldrich also said that the president's personal behavior created security concerns. Boy, did it ever. Think about this. The president of the United States of America informed his favorite intern that their phone conversations probably were being tapped or taped by a foreign embassy, so they should be careful. What if a foreign embassy actually had tapped the phone lines? We now know that the National Security Agency did have access to them and did tape. Luckily, the National Security Agency works for us.

Some behavior on the part of the president can be so reckless that it exposes him to international blackmail. We know the extent to which Bill Clinton was willing to go to conceal all of this from the American people. What else would he have done if those phone conversations had been tapped by a foreign embassy? We do

not want the president of the United States to be subject to blackmail.

There is also the issue of hypocrisy. Think about Executive Order #12968, issued on August 31, 1995, which said, "Individuals eligible for access to any classified material must have a record of strength of character, trustworthiness, honesty, reliability, discretion, and sound judgment, as well as freedom from conflicting allegiances and the potential for coercion or blackmail." That was signed by President William Jefferson Clinton. Ten weeks later, Monica Lewinsky delivered pizza, and the rest is history. That level of hypocrisy is bizarre even by Washington standards.

What's my point? Gary Aldrich was right: there was a security breakdown at the White House, and we had a right to know about it. Aldrich's book was completely ignored and trashed; it existed only on talk radio.

On that issue and others, talk radio has broadened public discussion and conventional wisdom in a way that is entirely healthy. Thomas Jefferson—who was roundly criticized by the press of his day and bitterly cynical about it—once said, "If I were given a choice between a country with newspapers and no government, and a country with government and no newspapers, I would choose a country with newspapers and no government."

Paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, I say that if I were given a choice between the sober, responsible conventional media wisdom that I see everywhere and no talk radio, and talk radio that makes a few mistakes and some-

times goes over the line in pursuit of entertainment values and the current conventional media wisdom, there is no choice. Talk radio has been a positive contribution to the public debate.

After his speech, John Fund talked with members of his audience, including Jason Lewis, a Twin Cities talk radio host, and moderators Tim Penny and Vin Weber, former Minnesota representatives to Congress.

Jason Lewis: People don't seem to want to talk about politics on talk radio. We need to bring in lifestyle talk.

John Fund: Any discussion that is of direct relevance to people's everyday lives is good. Politics is a component of that, but so too are the other things. Dr. Laura Schlessinger has an interesting hybrid. She talks about personal problems, but she does it from a moral framework.

A friend of mine, a talk radio host in Seattle, encouraged by station management, participated in several initiative campaigns and got signatures for a three-strikes-you're-out crime initiative and for other initiatives. Then he decided to do a California-style Proposition 209 that said the state should not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, or other considerations. This would have gotten rid of many of the quota programs in the public sector but would have left the private sector unchanged. Soon there were demonstrators outside. The new management—the station had been sold—got very upset. They had told him they would renew his contract, but they

strung out the negotiations for a month and then told him he had ten minutes to clear out his desk. A private business obviously has a right to do that, but it was unfortunate that they caved in to the most vociferous and intolerant elements of the community—people who were simply trying to shut him up because they disagreed with his point of view.

That has happened more than once. It is incumbent upon other talk radio hosts to let people know, but they have been reluctant to come to the defense of their brethren.

Jason Lewis: I agree with what you are saying, and I know the situation of which you speak, but I think it is due to the fact that station managers across the country—and certainly here in the Twin Cities—are afraid. They are worried about what kind of op-ed piece is going to be written about them now that they are harboring this rabid talk radio host. I have run into a little of that myself.

John Fund: This is where the entertainment values of talk radio can come to its defense. Ratings are ratings. The average station manager is willing to take a little heat if the ratings are high enough. It is incumbent on the host to present his point of view in an entertaining, interesting fashion that brings in listeners, but also doesn't go over the line and unnecessarily attack or disparage people or groups. That is clearly the challenge. Most talk radio hosts handle it responsibly. I understand the nervousness of management. Ultimately, given that station man-

agers are always going to be nervous, it is the talk radio host's imagination in approaching the issues that enables him to bring them to the fore.

Jason Lewis: Isn't there a disparity in the pressure that outside groups can bring to bear? If, say, a fundamentalist Christian group objected to a broadcaster, he would probably become a poster boy for the First Amendment rather than a victim, wouldn't he?

John Fund: Sure.

Tim Penny: In President Clinton's first year or two in office, he actually called a talk radio show and lamented that it is difficult for a president to govern when all across America these radio shows are trashing his agenda and undercutting his message and confusing the issues. Other presidents have felt besieged, too, but is it worse today because of this kind of presence in the media?

John Fund: Presidents have always felt besieged, which is ironic because they run the tallest bully pulpit in the country and uniquely among elected officials have the ability to attract media attention by whatever they do, no matter what it is. Almost every major newspaper publisher and editor in the country opposed Franklin Roosevelt at a time when publishers and editors actually told reporters what to write. Roosevelt railed against the monopolistic media that were attacking him, and he used the new medium of radio in his Fireside Chats to rally people to his cause. Almost every major newspaper in America opposed

him for reelection in 1936, and he won 62 percent of the vote.

After President Clinton's outburst against Rush Limbaugh and other talk show hosts, he learned how to play the game. He twice invited 200 talk show hosts to set up on the White House lawn and paraded out all the administration officials. The president's initiatives have worked on talk radio when he has talked about school uniforms and smaller class sizes. Agree or disagree, he has clearly shifted the emphasis away from his early issues such as gays in the military and health care to more narrowly focused concerns that people can identify with in their daily lives.

Tim Penny: On a totally different track, is there something that would explain why this medium seems to be dominated by white men? Why is it that, except for Barbara Carlson and a handful of others, we don't seem to find a lot of women talk radio hosts?

Jason Lewis: Barbara Carlson may be the reason there aren't more women in talk radio.

John Fund: White men are still next in line for the positions, but that is changing. Barbara Carlson is not alone. There are many national radio talk show hosts who are women, and there are many others who are nationally syndicated. It may take a while to build an audience because it depends on name recognition. If you are G. Gordon Liddy or Ollie North and you have fame or infamy based on something you did many years ago, it is easier to get recognition and advertiser support. If you are a woman and you

haven't been active in public life, it's harder. There are an increasing number of minority talk show hosts.

Clarkson Lindley: The three of you [Fund, Weber, Penny] probably can call up any editor in the country and at least get a piece looked at. Our great newspaper here in Minneapolis now has a page called News with a View, which I find to be like driving through a strange town and seeing a restaurant sign that says "Eat Here, Good Food." What is a newspaper but news with a view? Has there been feedback from talk radio to newspapers and magazines about being more interactive and open to wider views?

John Fund: The impact of talk radio on newspapers has not been particularly good. There is a new movement afoot called civic journalism. This is the bizarre theory that you do focus groups and polling, just like politicians, and you find out what issues your readers are interested in and then construct a series of forums and discussions on the editorial page. You basically turn over the newspaper's editorial page political coverage to focus groups. In part this is a response to talk radio and the fact that it is an interactive medium.

It's an abdication of the responsibility of editors to decide what is important. I do think newspapers should pay more attention to their communities, and I do think newspapers—including the one in Minneapolis—are often completely ignorant of certain elements of their community and completely dismissive of other elements,

but editors are there for a reason. They decide what's news. Turning it over to the readers often gives you garbage in, garbage out. Editors' responsibility is to give people the news that they think is relevant and also to pay attention to the community to make sure that they are not going too far afield of what its interests are.

Ray Joachim: I appreciate talk radio, but I have a problem with the half truths, the distortions, and the flat-out lies that go unchallenged.

John Fund: Sounds like a political campaign, doesn't it?

This is the price we pay. Could it be better? Yes. Wouldn't it be nice if a talk radio host had a guy whose head was stuffed with facts sitting next to him and this guy would say, "That caller is wrong: it says such and such in the World Almanac." But that wouldn't make good radio. It might be nice if talk radio hosts had a special line for callers who absolutely, positively have an irrefutable fact that contradicts something that has been disseminated on the airwaves. They would have thirty seconds to say, "This is simply not true: the World Almanac says the tallest mountain in North America is Mount McKinley" or whatever. I don't know any other way to deal with this. Remember, one of my premises is that this is not news; this is entertainment. Caveat emptor. The editing standards of a newspaper do not apply. That's part of the appeal.

Pastor Saul Stensvaag: You pointed out that talk radio opens up the

debate, and I can see the point of that, but I'm also concerned about the callers to talk radio. The title of the forum today is "Talk Radio: Is It Good for the Soul of the Nation?" When I listen to talk radio, I sense a lot of anger—maybe justifiable anger—and I feel somewhat dehumanized. There is so much negativism, so much attacking. I'm concerned about what that does to us as a people.

John Fund: But do you blame the messenger, or do you blame the underlying reasons for that anger? Have you ever been to a New England town meeting? Lots of people get up and kvetch and moan and groan and blow off steam. That's our oldest form of direct democracy.

There is a lot of anger out there. It is better expressed on talk radio as an outlet than in many other places. I've lived with road rage in Los Angeles, and I can tell you what people who are really angry can do with two tons of machinery.

We may regret the anger, but we should understand why people are angry. Sometimes they are angry for good reasons: Taxes are too high. Government is inefficient. Politicians often ignore legitimate concerns.

Anger should not be expressed in racist, sexist, truly dehumanizing terms, and it should not target groups. Most radio managers act responsibly. There is a seven-second delay, and that kind of stuff goes off the air—or the caller gets slapped down, and that is all to the good.

Dorothy LeGrand: You assume that the callers are angry, but some of us are passionate.

Vin Weber: You talked about the fact that Jefferson said he would rather have newspapers without a government than a government without newspapers. The newspapers of Jefferson's time, of course, were partisan papers, and some of them savaged him as viciously as anything talk radio has done to Bill Clinton or anybody else, including savaging him specifically about his sex life. The medium may change, the technology may change, but the phenomenon is not necessarily different in terms of the kind of discussion that goes on in the body politic.

One of your vocations these days is Internet journalist. We are with Internet journalism where we were ten years ago with talk radio. What effect will Internet journalism have on our political culture?

John Fund: Internet journalism is like talk radio in that there is a lot of good information and a lot of hearsay. Over time, there is a sifting process by which people who are reliable develop audiences. I think we are already seeing a shift. Some talk radio hosts—Rush Limbaugh is an example—start out being very controversial, then they find an audience and they tend to keep that audience and their level of credibility goes up over time. If you take risks, you often can get noticed. The question then becomes what you do with that. Do you remain somebody who doesn't have high journalistic standards, or do you develop some

credibility? But at least we have a chance for new talent to break in new thoughts and new opinions.

Tim Penny: Talk radio may not be an information medium, but it certainly is a medium for participation. Policy makers have something to learn from this. We need to create processes that give people a sense that their voice can be heard and that what they have to contribute will be taken into account. Nothing I did in my years in Congress taught me as much as visits to coffee shops and town hall meetings, even if only six people attended. The average voter wants to have a voice in the government, and if more people felt that they had that sort of access—instead of being bombarded with thirty-second campaign ads that tell you only what the candidate wants you to know, or wants you to hear—we might have less anger on the talk shows and more passion being constructively channeled into the political process. n