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Late-Period Limbaugh

By ZEV CHAFETS

‘The [Rush Limbaugh Show](#)’ goes on the air every weekday at 12:06 P.M. Eastern Time.

At one time, Limbaugh did his program from a Midtown Manhattan skyscraper he dubbed, with tongue-in-cheek grandiosity, the Excellence in Broadcasting Building. These days, he mostly broadcasts out of a studio in Palm Beach, Fla., which he calls the Southern Command, and describes on the air as a “heavily fortified bunker.”

In fact, Limbaugh’s show emanates from a nondescript office building on a boulevard lined with tall palms. There isn’t even a security guard in the lobby. The elevator opens directly onto a pristine anteroom furnished in corporate glass and leather. An American flag stands in the corner. Only a small, framed picture of Limbaugh, bearing the caption “America’s Anchorman,” reveals that this is the headquarters of one of the country’s most admired and reviled figures.

The anteroom was empty when I stepped off the elevator one afternoon in mid-February. Limbaugh receives very few visitors at work, and no journalists from the hated “mainstream media.” When I was buzzed into the control room, I was met by Bo Snerdly — a very large man in a Huey Newton beret — who glared at me. “Are you the guy who’s here to do the hit job on us?” he demanded in a deep voice.

“Absolutely,” I said.

Snerdly, whose real name is James Golden, held my eyes for a long moment before bursting into emphatic laughter.

“It’s just that we aren’t used to seeing reporters here,” said a woman named Dawn. She is a stenographer whom Limbaugh hired in 2001, after he went deaf. These days he has a cochlear implant that enables him to hear callers, but Dawn sends him real-time transcripts of on-air conversations, just in case.

“The media doesn’t know about this place,” she said. “They don’t know where we are. During Rush’s big drug story they staked out the whole town, even his house, but they never found us here.”

For the next hour I sat behind the glass panel of the control booth and watched Limbaugh at work in front of the “golden E.I.B. microphone.” Unlike [Howard Stern](#) or [Don Imus](#), he has no sidekicks with him in the room. He does, however, keep up a running conversation with an unheard voice. I always assumed that this was just imaginary radio shtick. Now I saw that the voice was attached to a human interlocutor, Snerdly, who banters with and occasionally badgers Limbaugh via an internal talk-back circuit.

After the broadcast, Limbaugh waved me into the studio and offered me a seat directly across from him. The

room's acoustics make it relatively easy for him to hear, but he also reads lips.

I had come to talk to Limbaugh about his role in [Republican Party](#) politics. During the primaries he assailed [John McCain](#) as a phony conservative and apostate Reaganite. Despite Limbaugh's best efforts, it now appeared that the Arizona senator would be the nominee. There was speculation that Limbaugh would not support him in November.

"I've never even met the man, never spoken to him," Limbaugh said. "I'm sure there are things about him I'd like if we meet. This isn't personal." He then delivered a litany of the presumptive nominee's personal failings — too old, too intense, too opportunistic, too liberal. But, he assured me, he would be with McCain in the fall. "It's like the [Super Bowl](#)," he told me. "If your team isn't in it, you root for the team you hate less. That's McCain."

It already seemed, when I made my visit, that McCain's opponent might well be Senator Obama, and I was curious to know how Limbaugh planned to take on America's first African-American major-party nominee. "I'll approach Obama with fearless honesty," said Limbaugh, who speaks of himself in heroic terms on air and off. "He's a liberal. I oppose liberals. That's all that's involved here."

I asked if he had any specific tactics in mind.

"I haven't yet figured that out exactly," he said. "You know, I've had a problem with substance abuse. I don't deal with the future anymore. I take things one day at a time."

In this case, it took two. I was back in New York, listening to the radio, when I heard Limbaugh say: "Ladies and gentlemen, I had a conversation with a friend Wednesday afternoon after the program, and he said, 'Nobody's criticizing Obama. How are you going to do this? How are you going to handle criticizing the first black American to run for president?' I said: 'I'm going to do it the way I always do it. First, at the top of the list, I'm going to do it fearlessly. I'm not going to bow to political correctness. I'm going to do it with humor. I'm going to focus on the issues. I'm going to react to what he says. Simple. I'm going to do it just like it were any other case — he's a man, right? He's a liberal. How do I criticize liberals? I criticize them.' But I have devised, ladies and gentlemen, an even more creative way of criticizing Obama. I have, just this morning, named a new position here on the staff that is the Official Obama Criticizer. The E.I.B. Network now has an Official Obama Criticizer. He is Bo Snerdly."

Snerdly introduced himself as an "African-American-in-good-standing-and-certified-black-enough-to-criticize-Obama guy," and declared that he was speaking, "on behalf of our E.I.B. brothers and sisters in the hood." The bit was typical Limbaugh — confrontational, deliberately insensitive and funny. It was also a declaration of independence. Whatever special courtesies John McCain might plan to extend to [Barack Obama](#), Limbaugh is going to conduct his air war, as he always has, by his own rules of engagement.

ON AUG. 1, LIMBAUGH WILL CELEBRATE the 20th anniversary of his national radio program. At 57, he is an American icon, although his fans and critics don't agree on precisely what he is iconic for. I've heard him compared to [Mark Twain](#) and [Jackie Gleason](#), the Founding Fathers and Father Coughlin. Serious people have called him a serial liar and a moral philosopher, a partisan hack and a public intellectual, nothing more than a radio windbag and nothing less than the heart of the Republican Party.

One thing is certain: Limbaugh has been a partisan force for two decades. In 1994, he was so influential in the Republican Congressional landslide that the grateful winners made him an honorary member of the G.O.P. freshman class. He moved not only voters, but the party itself. "Rush talked about the 'Contract With America' before there was a 'Contract With America,'" [Karl Rove](#) told me. "He helped set the agenda."

Limbaugh has been a factor in every national election of the past 20 years, but not since the mid-1990s has he been so prominent. Democrats have blamed him for everything from invading their primaries to starting scurrilous rumors about [Michelle Obama](#). Limbaugh denies the latter accusation, but he happily embraces the former. His vehicle was so-called Operation Chaos, a radio campaign designed to encourage Republicans to vote for [Hillary Clinton](#) and prolong internecine fighting among liberals.

Nobody quite knows how effective Operation Chaos was. Karl Rove said he thinks it helped tilt Texas for Clinton. She herself gave this some credence on the day after the vote by jauntily saying, "Be careful what you wish for, Rush." [Howard Dean](#) implored primary voters in Indiana and North Carolina to ignore Limbaugh. The Obama supporter [Arianna Huffington](#) called Limbaugh and other conservative hosts "toxic curiosities." After Clinton won in Indiana, where 10 percent of Democratic primary voters admitted to exit pollsters that they were really Republicans, Senator [John Kerry](#) accused Limbaugh of "tampering with the primary" and causing Obama's defeat.

Limbaugh was delighted. He deemed Operation Chaos to have "exceeded all expectations" (his customary self-evaluation) and explained once again that he wasn't supporting Clinton but merely trying to bloody Obama because John McCain was too chicken to do it and because he believed that Obama would then be easier to beat in November.

Probably both the Democrats and Limbaugh overstated his actual impact. But Operation Chaos was a triumph of interactive political performance art. Limbaugh appointed himself Supreme Commander, deputized his listeners and turned them into merry pranksters. "Rush is a master at framing an issue and creating a community around it," says Susan Estrich, who ran Michael Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign and has since become a talk-show host herself. Operation Chaos drew a crowd, which is what Limbaugh does for a living. It got people laughing at the Democrats, which is what he lives for. And, ever the devout capitalist, he turned an extra buck by peddling Operation Chaos gear. The stuff flew off the cybershelves of the E.I.B. store, the biggest seller since his Club Gitmo collection ("my mullah went to Club Gitmo and all I got was this lousy T-shirt").

None of these high jinks would have mattered if Limbaugh were a regular radio personality. But he isn't. Michael Harrison, the editor and publisher of Talkers magazine, a trade publication, puts Limbaugh's weekly audience at 14 million. Limbaugh himself says it is closer to 20 million. Either way, nobody else is close. He has been the top-rated radio talk-show host in America since the magazine started the ranking 17 years ago.

Such massive and consistent popularity makes Limbaugh a singular political force. "Rush has completely remade American politics by offering an alternative to the networks and CNN," Rove told me. "For 20 years he has been the leader of his own parade."

Harrison offered an even more grandiose view: "He's a phenomenon like the Beatles. Before Rush Limbaugh there was nothing like talk radio. He's been to talk what Elvis was to rock 'n' roll. He saved the AM dial."

“ANTICIPATING A QUESTION,” Limbaugh said when we pulled into the garage of his secluded beachfront mansion in Palm Beach, “why do I have so many cars?”

I hadn’t actually been wondering that. Very rich people tend not to stint on transportation. For example, we drove to the house from the studio, Limbaugh at the wheel, in a black Maybach 57S, which runs around \$450,000 fully loaded. He had half a dozen similar rides on his estate.

“I have these cars for two reasons,” Limbaugh said. “First, they are for the use of my guests. And two, I happen to love fine automobiles.”

He also loves space. There are five homes — all of them his — on the property. The big house is 24,000 square feet. Limbaugh lives there with a cat. He’s been married three times but has no children.

Limbaugh informed me that I was the first journalist ever to enter his home. [Mary Matalin](#), the Republican consultant, calls the place “aspirational,” which is one adjective that fits. The place, largely designed by Limbaugh himself, reflects the things and places he has seen and admired. The massive chandelier in the dining room, for example, is a replica of the one that hung in the lobby of [the Plaza Hotel](#) in New York. The gleaming cherry-wood floors are dotted with hand-woven oriental carpets. A life-size oil portrait of El Rushbo, as he often calls himself on the air, hangs on the wall of the main staircase.

Unlike many right-wing talk-show hosts, Limbaugh does not view France with hostility. On the contrary, he is a Francophile. His salon, he told me, is meant to suggest Versailles. His main guest suite, which I did not personally inspect, was designed as an exact replica of the presidential suite of the George V Hotel in Paris.

Limbaugh is especially proud of his two-story library, which is a scaled-down version of the library at the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina. Cherubs dance on the ceiling, leatherbound collections line the bookshelves and the wood-paneled walls were once “an acre of mahogany.”

A fastidious man, Limbaugh has a keen eye for domestic detail. His staff lights fragrant candles throughout the house to greet his arrival from work each day. Limbaugh led me into his private humidor, selected two La Flor Dominicana Double Ligerero Chisel stogies for us to smoke and seated me at an onyx-and-marble table in the study. The room opens onto a patio, a putting green and a beach. On the table was a brochure for Limbaugh’s newest airplane, a Gulfstream G550. It cost him, he told me, \$54 million.

Limbaugh can afford to live the way he wants. When we met he was on the verge of signing a new eight-year contract with his syndicator, Premiere Radio Networks. He estimated that it would bring in about \$38 million a year. To sweeten the deal, he said he was also getting a nine-figure signing bonus. (A representative from Premiere would not confirm the deal.) “Do you know what bought me all this?” he asked, waving his hand in the general direction of his prosperity. “Not my political ideas. Conservatism didn’t buy this house. First and foremost I’m a businessman. My first goal is to attract the largest possible audience so I can charge confiscatory ad rates. I happen to have great entertainment skills, but that enables me to sell airtime.”

The average AM radio station reserves 18 to 20 minutes each hour for advertising, devotes about 5 minutes an hour to news and spends the rest of the time on other content. Limbaugh is not only paid by the stations, but his program also owns five minutes of every hour of airtime, which it can then sell to advertisers.

Some simply run their usual ads. Others use Limbaugh as their pitchman, which costs them a premium and a long-term commitment. And lately he has created a new option. At a much higher rate he will weave a product into his monologue (To a caller who said he took two showers after voting for Clinton in Operation Chaos, Limbaugh responded: “If you had followed my advice and gotten a Rinnai tankless water heater, you wouldn’t have needed to take two showers. And I’ll tell you why. . . .”)

Limbaugh is being uncharacteristically modest when he attributes his wealth to simple salesmanship. First, you have to draw — and keep — a crowd. “Rush is just an amazing radio performer,” says Ira Glass, a star of the younger generation of public-radio personalities. “Years ago, I used to listen in the car on my way to reporting gigs, and I’d notice that I disagreed with everything he was saying, yet I not only wanted to keep listening, I actually liked him. That is some chops. You can count on two hands the number of public figures in America who can pull that trick off.”

Glass compares Limbaugh to another exceptional free-form radio monologist, Howard Stern. “A lot of people dismiss them both as pandering and proselytizing and playing to the lowest common denominator, but I think that misses everything important about their shows,” he says. “They both think through their ideas in real time on the air, they both have a lot more warmth than they’re generally given credit for, they both created an entire radio aesthetic.”

LIMBAUGH STARTED LOSING HIS HEARING seven years ago, at the age of 50. Increasingly powerful hearing aids helped for a while, but eventually they stopped working. For almost two months he did his show without being able to hear a thing. Regular listeners began noticing that something was wrong. “When I found myself going deaf, I didn’t panic,” he told me. “I was diagnosed with auto-immune disease.” (Limbaugh says he doesn’t know what kind of auto-immune disorder it was.) “Once I knew the problem, I looked for a practical solution,” he continued. “Eventually I flew out to California and had a cochlear implant. Luckily, it worked.” Doctors, he told me, attribute this positive outcome to the relatively advanced age when he lost his hearing and the short time he was deaf.

Limbaugh is known for his wicked impersonations of [Bill Clinton](#), [Ted Kennedy](#), John McCain and others.

“How can you imitate anyone if you can’t hear yourself?” I asked him.

He touched his throat. “I know how the muscles are supposed to feel when I do the voices.”

Limbaugh’s voice is his instrument, and he has been honing it since he began his radio career as a high-school disc jockey. He still loves music, although he hears it most clearly in his memory. “The last song I actually remember was probably a Luther Vandross tune,” he told me. “But if I put on oldies I know how they are supposed to sound.”

He still uses a lot of rock ’n’ roll in his broadcasts, introducing segments with [Tina Turner](#)’s “The Best” or sampling an old [Bo Diddley](#) riff: “Come on in closer baby, hear what else I got to say. You got your radio turned down too low. Turn it up!”

We were on the way to Trevini, one of Limbaugh’s favorite Palm Beach restaurants. Once again, Limbaugh was at the wheel. His girlfriend, Kathryn Rogers, a West Palm Beach events planner, rode shotgun. They met

at a golf tournament last summer and have been an item since.

The Maybach was quiet enough for easy conversation, but the restaurant was a different story. We sat at a prime corner table, but the place was packed, and the decibel level caused him to frequently cup his hand to his ear, and sometimes miss entire sentences.

Throughout dinner, people approached our table. Most were prosperous-looking Republican men of a certain age. “God bless you,” they told him, or, “Keep up the fight.” He smiled and thanked them in a good-natured way. One elderly gent in a blue blazer and gray slacks went into a long spiel about his good works on behalf of several conservative causes. Limbaugh nodded through the recitation, but when the man left he confided that he had not understood a word of it.

Meanwhile, waiters buzzed around our table. They seemed to anticipate Limbaugh’s every wish, refreshing our drinks, serving unasked-for delicacies, periodically checking to make sure everything was exactly to Limbaugh’s satisfaction.

Table talk focused on Limbaugh’s house, or rather his concern over my reaction to it. That afternoon I wondered aloud what a single man with no kids could possibly want with a house that size. He frowned, obviously interpreting it as a hostile question, a Democrat question. Now he wanted to revisit the topic.

“When you saw my house today, you probably noticed that it isn’t filled with pictures of me and famous people,” he said. “That’s not me. I don’t have a home that says, ‘Look who I know!’ ”

“No, you have a home that says, ‘Look what I have.’ ”

“Why would you say that?” He sounded genuinely surprised, possibly even hurt.

“It might have something to do with that acre of mahogany you mentioned earlier.”

“My home is a place I feel comfortable in, a place for entertaining my friends and family,” he said.

Later, his friend [Roger Ailes](#), a frequent guest and the chairman of Fox News, put the Limbaugh lifestyle in perspective. “He lives the way Jackie Gleason would have lived if Gleason had the money. Some people are irritated by it.”

Dinner was winding down, and I called for the check. It tickled Limbaugh to be taken out to eat on The New York Times. A few weeks later, he sent me a copy of an interview with Jeremy Sullivan, a waiter at the Kobe KobeClub in New York. Sullivan told a reporter that Limbaugh, a fellow Missourian, was the biggest tipper in town: “He likes to throw down the most massive tips I’ve ever seen. The last few times his tips have been \$5,000.” When I read this, I felt a stab of guilt toward the hyperattentive staff at Trevini. If I had only known, I would have let Limbaugh leave the tip.

LIMBAUGH WAS A FAILURE almost as long as he has been a success. And although he is now an apostle of sunshine (“having more fun than a human being should be allowed to have,” he crows on his show), he spent many years trying to convince his family — and himself — that he wasn’t wasting his life.

People sometimes wonder if Rush is a real name. It is, times three. He was born Rush Limbaugh III in 1951, in the Mississippi River town of Cape Girardeau, Mo. Cape Girardeau was Eisenhower America, Middle Western but far enough South that Limbaugh's younger brother David still speaks with a discernible twang. "Rush got the voice in the family," he told me, unnecessarily.

The Limbaughs were local gentry. Rush's grandfather, Rush Sr., was a venerated lawyer who practiced law past the age of 100. Uncle Steve Limbaugh is a federal judge, although he will soon step down as his son, Rush's cousin Steve, joins the federal bench. David Limbaugh, who still lives in Cape Girardeau, writes books and a syndicated political column, along with handling his brother's legal work.

Limbaugh's father, Rush Jr., was a lawyer, too, a prominent local Republican activist and the most influential figure in his sons' lives. He served as a pilot in World War II and became vehemently anti-Communist and very much committed to the ideas and ideals of small-town Protestant America. Limbaugh remembers his father playing host to Vice President [Richard Nixon](#) in Cape Girardeau in the 1956 election. To this day, Limbaugh calls his father "the smartest man I've ever met."

Certainly he was one of the most opinionated and autocratic. "On Friday nights my friends would come over to the house just to listen to my dad rant about politics," Limbaugh recalls. "He was doing the same thing as I do today, without the humor or the satire. He didn't approve of making fun of presidents. He didn't think that sort of thing was funny."

Dick Adams, Rush's boyhood friend and high-school debate partner, told me: "Mr. Limbaugh didn't suffer fools lightly, let's just put it like that. Many times I was over there when he called down Rush or David in harsh tones. There was usually a string of expletives attached."

Father-son arguments weren't political. Rush seems to have swallowed his father's monologues whole. Like the great black singers of his generation, Limbaugh took the familiar pieties and ambient sounds of his time and place and used them to create a genre of entertainment, full of humor, passion and commercial possibility. There are many ways to look at Rush Limbaugh III: one is that he is the first white, Goldwater Republican soul shouter.

But first he had to get out of town.

"My father expected me to be a professional man," Limbaugh told me. "The problem was, I hated school. I hated being told what to do. In the [Boy Scouts](#) I never got a single merit badge. In school my grades were terrible. I just didn't want to be there. I just wanted to be on the radio."

Rush's father hoped the boy would grow out of this ambition. But to appease him, he lent 16-year-old Rush the money for a summer course in radio engineering in Dallas. Limbaugh returned with a broadcaster's license, which he parlayed into a job at the local radio station. Soon he had his own show. Being on the radio made him a local celebrity, and he never lost the taste for it.

Limbaugh was miserable when his father insisted he attend college. Under protest he enrolled at nearby Southeast Missouri State University, where he lasted a year. Somehow he even contrived to flunk speech.

“My mother used to drive me there and pick me up, just to make sure I’d go,” he told me. “But it didn’t do any good. First chance I got, I was out of there.”

Limbaugh hit the road in a 1969 Pontiac LeMans. He spent the 1970s spinning records at radio stations around the country under the name Jeff Christie. From the start, he had a knack for making people laugh. In Pittsburgh he sometimes convinced callers he could see them via a special telephone. He did voices and parodies.

Limbaugh drifted from job to job. He was wounded by his father’s disapproval, unable to make a real go of the radio business and unlucky in marriage. In the mid-’80s he took a job in the front office of the Kansas City Royals baseball team. He was making \$12,000 a year, and he almost quit to take a more lucrative job as a potato-chip distributor. “They were offering \$35,000,” he told me. “That sounded like a lot of money.”

Instead, he decided to take a last gamble on his talent. He found a radio job in Sacramento where, for the first time, he started airing his conservative opinions and really developing his bombastic, politically incorrect, El Rushbo persona. The show was a hit.

“In those days the mainstream liberals had a media monopoly,” he says. “All three TV networks, CNN, Time and Newsweek, and the newspapers. AM radio was considered a dying venue. Nobody did political talk, let alone conservative political talk.”

Limbaugh said things that people had never heard on the radio. He mocked the women’s movement (“feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women access to the mainstream of society”); scoffed at sex education (“condoms work only during the school year”); and took on conventional wisdom (“using federal dollars as a measure, our cities have not been neglected but poisoned with welfare-dependency funds”). It is hard to imagine, so many years later, how strange and rebellious, how simply wrong, such sentiments sounded.

In 1988, Limbaugh moved to New York and took his show national. He came to the city with the usual make-it-there, make-it-anywhere expectations. The show, carried locally on WABC-AM, was a national hit. But socially, he flopped.

“I assumed there was a fraternity of broadcasting guys in New York,” he told me. “I thought my success would launch me into a circle of accomplished people. Look, I admired these people. [Peter Jennings](#), [Tom Brokaw](#), [Dan Rather](#) — people watched these guys. I thought they would welcome me as one of them. I was wrong.” Eventually Limbaugh came to a rather obvious conclusion. “I realized that my professional achievements were discounted because of my conservatism and my constant criticism of those who I thought would welcome me.”

Why on earth did he expect people he was mocking on the air to embrace him, I asked.

“Immaturity,” he said. “I was shocked by the visceral hatred. Nobody hated me growing up. Nobody hated me in Kansas City. Even in Sacramento, which is a liberal town, nobody hated me. That didn’t happen until I got to Manhattan.”

Not everyone in the big city gave Limbaugh the cold shoulder. [William F. Buckley Jr.](#), the publisher of *The National Review*, saw the young broadcaster's star power and took Limbaugh into his orbit. Limbaugh was honored by the attention.

"I grew up on *National Review* and Mr. Buckley," Limbaugh told me. "Aside from my father, he's the most influential man in my life." In Buckley's circle he was an incongruous figure — provincial, self-educated and full of déclassé rock-and-roll enthusiasm. But Buckley took Limbaugh seriously, cultivated him, promoted him and saw to it that he connected with the right people.

Buckley died a few days after my first visit to Limbaugh in Florida. Limbaugh mourned him on the air and off. But he also had a sense that, with Buckley's passing, he now became the movement's elder statesman. Jay Nordlinger, a senior editor at *The National Review*, watched Limbaugh's tutelage under Buckley, and he takes Limbaugh seriously as a polemicist and public intellectual. "I hired a lot of people over the years, fancy kids from elite schools, and I always asked, 'How did you become a conservative?' Many of them said, 'Listening to Rush Limbaugh.' And often they'd add, 'Behind my parents' back.'"

Limbaugh's audience is often underestimated by critics who don't listen to the show (only 3 percent of his audience identify themselves as "liberal," according to the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People and the Press). Recently, Pew reported that, on a series of "news knowledge questions," Limbaugh's "Dittoheads" — the defiantly self-mocking term for his faithful, supposedly brainwashed, audience — scored higher than NPR listeners. The study found that "readers of newsmagazines, political magazines and business magazines, listeners of Rush Limbaugh and NPR and viewers of the *Daily Show* and C-SPAN are also much more likely than the average person to have a college degree."

For his part, Limbaugh sees himself as a thinker as well as showman. "I take the responsibility that comes with my show very seriously," he told me. "I want to persuade people with ideas. I don't walk around thinking about my power. But in my heart and soul, I know I have become the intellectual engine of the conservative movement."

In truth, Limbaugh is less a theoretician than a popularizer of what he regards as the correct conservative responses to contemporary issues. Most of his concerns are economic. "I consider myself a defender of corporate America," he told me. Limbaugh is admired by the religious right, but he is far from pious on matters of adult behavior. He is also one of the few commentators — left or right — who never speaks cloyingly about America's obligation to its children and grandchildren.

Recently, I sent Limbaugh an e-mail message, his preferred means of long-distance communication, asking what his own presidential agenda would look like. His answer reflects his actual concerns. A Limbaugh administration would seek to:

1. Open the continental shelf to drilling. Ditto the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
2. Establish a 17 percent flat tax.
3. Privatize Social Security.

4. Give parents school vouchers to break the monopoly of public education.
5. Revoke [Jimmy Carter](#)'s passport while he is out of the country.
6. Abandon all government policies based on the hoax of man-made [global warming](#).

No. 5 was a joke. I think.

EVERY APRIL, LIMBAUGH HOSTS A WEEKEND at his Palm Beach estate for his closest friends. This year the guest list included Roger Ailes, Mary Matalin and Joel Surnow, a creator of the television series "24" and a leader of the small Hollywood conservative community. The event is social but hardly nonpolitical.

Anyone looking for an informal gathering of the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy could do worse than this. Limbaugh is also close to Karl Rove, who dined with him a few weeks earlier in Florida; Justice [Antonin Scalia](#) (last year he attended a dinner at cousin Steve Limbaugh's Cape Girardeau home); and Justice [Clarence Thomas](#) (who officiated at Limbaugh's third wedding). He describes his fellow Floridian [Matt Drudge](#) as a buddy. [George H. W. Bush](#) invited Limbaugh to sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom.

More recently, [Dick Cheney](#) toasted Limbaugh at a dinner party; a copy of the vice president's remarks hangs on Limbaugh's wall at home. But Limbaugh's real hero and constant role model is [Ronald Reagan](#).

Limbaugh admires many aspects of Reaganism, but he is especially animated by his belief in American exceptionalism. "Reagan rejected the notion among liberals and conservatives alike who, for different reasons, believed America was in a permanent state of decline," he wrote to me in an e-mail message. "He had faith in the wisdom of the American people. . . . He knew America wasn't perfect, but he also knew it was the most perfect of nations. Reagan was an advocate of Americanism." In response to a separate question, he wrote: "America is the solution to the world's problems. We are not the problem."

Limbaugh said he believes that President [George W. Bush](#) is well meaning but far from the Reagan standard of excellence. "I like President Bush," he wrote me, "but he is not a conservative. He is conservative on some things, but he has not led a movement as Reagan did every day of his career. Bush's unpopularity is due primarily to his reluctance to publicly defend himself and his administration against attacks from the left. . . . The country has not tilted to the left in my view. What has been absent is elected conservative leadership from the White House down to the Congress."

Needless to say, Limbaugh doesn't see John McCain as the answer to this problem, and it infuriates him when McCain claims to be a Reaganite. "McCain and Reagan do not belong in the same sentence," he wrote.

Of course, his problems with McCain won't prevent Limbaugh from trying to defeat Obama or from trying to push McCain toward his views. Some think he is already succeeding in the latter mission. Mary Matalin, who has a great belief in Limbaugh's powers of persuasion with the public, said: "Why do you think McCain changed on the [immigration](#) issue? Because of his *advisers*?"

Karl Rove says he thinks Limbaugh's greatest influence in this election cycle will be as a backbone-stiffening agent: "He's a leader," Rove said. "If Rush engages on an issue, it gives others courage to engage."

It is a tough job this year, and Limbaugh said he knows it. Despite his insistence that Obama is just another liberal, attacking and ridiculing him will be delicate work. “There is nothing worse than being branded a racist,” he told me at the end of our last meeting in Florida. “That’s what Bill Clinton tried to do to me.”

At the first White House correspondents’ dinner of the Clinton administration, the president cracked that Limbaugh had stood up for Attorney General [Janet Reno](#), but he “only did it because she was attacked by a black guy.” (The “black guy” being Representative [John Conyers](#).)

Limbaugh was in the audience, and he was livid. He demanded, and received, a White House apology. It was reminiscent of the time F.D.R. went after the legendary H. L. Mencken at a Gridiron Club dinner in 1934. Limbaugh took it as a warning. “If they successfully tar you as a racist, you are David Duke,” Limbaugh told me.

On May 16, Limbaugh delivered a monologue on what you can’t say about Obama: “With Obama we started out, we couldn’t talk about his big ears ’cause that made him nervous. We’ve gone from that to this: Not only can we not mention his ears, we can’t talk about his mother. We can’t talk about his father. We can’t talk about his grandmother unless he does, brings her up as a ‘typical white person.’ We can’t talk about his wife, can’t talk about his preacher, can’t talk about his terrorist friends, can’t talk about his voting record, can’t talk about his religion. We can’t talk about appeasement. We can’t talk about color; we can’t talk about lack of color. We can’t talk about race. We can’t talk about bombers and mobsters who are his friends. We can’t talk about schooling. We can’t talk about his name, ‘Hussein.’ We can’t talk about his lack of experience. Can’t talk about his income. Can’t talk about his flag pin. This started out we can’t call him a liberal. It started out we just couldn’t talk about his ears. Now we can’t say anything about him.”

So far Limbaugh’s tactic has been to frame his attacks on Obama in the words of liberals themselves. Among the musical parodies, which he writes with the comedian Paul Shanklin, in his arsenal is “Barack the Magic Negro,” sung to the tune of “Puff the Magic Dragon,” by a dead-on [Al Sharpton](#) impersonator. The song was met by indignation when he first played it in March — until Limbaugh revealed that the title and the idea of Obama as a redemptive black man à la [Sidney Poitier](#) — came from an op-ed piece written by a black commentator, David Ehrenstein, in The Los Angeles Times.

Sharpton is too much a master of such signification to miss the art in Limbaugh’s boomerang trick. “I despise his ideology,” Sharpton told me, “but Rush is a lot smarter and craftier than Don Imus. Limbaugh puts things in a way that he can’t be blamed for easy bigotry. Some of the songs he does about me just make me laugh. But he’s the most dangerous guy we have to deal with on the right, including O’Reilly and Imus. They come at you with an ax. He uses a razor.”

THE ATMOSPHERE in the studio on the morning after our dinner at Trevini was relaxed, even festive. When I arrived around 11, Limbaugh was at his computer, wearing shorts and doing prep.

Augusto, his personal chef, was there, preparing lunch, signaling an occasion. Limbaugh skipped the meal, explaining that he doesn’t eat close to show time for reasons of “burp prevention.” Snerdly, Dawn and the engineer joined me in the dining room, which looks as if it were decorated by [Nancy Reagan](#)’s fussy aunt.

Limbaugh’s program that day was, as usual, a virtuoso performance. He took a few calls, but mostly he

delivered a series of monologues on political and cultural topics. Limbaugh works extemporaneously. He has no writers or script, just notes and a producer on the line from New York with occasional bits of information. That day, and every day, he produced 10,000 words of fluent, often clever political talk.

There was nothing he said that was startling — he spent parts of the show mocking Obama’s “change” mantra and excoriating those who believe in global warming and talking about foreign affairs. But if you think it is easy turning ancient Greenland, the influence of the teachers’ unions or changes in E.U. foreign policy into polemical comedy that will hold an audience for three hours — try it for 15 minutes at your next cocktail party.

Limbaugh entertains, but he also instructs. He provides his listeners with news and views they can use, and he teaches them how to employ it. “Rush is an intellectual-force multiplier,” Rove told me. “His listeners are, themselves, communicators.”

After the show, Limbaugh and I sat in the studio for several hours talking. He was in an expansive mood, and he didn’t duck when I asked him about the most infamous chapter of his career, his drug bust. In 2006, after years of addiction to painkillers, Limbaugh was charged in Florida with “doctor shopping” prescriptions. He pleaded not guilty and cut a deal; the charges would be dismissed after 18 months if he continued rehabilitation and treatment with a therapist.

Needless to say, the case became a national scandal. His enemies jeered that the white knight of American conservatism was a junkie. His fans feared the scandal might end his career. Some prayed for him. Limbaugh’s lawyer, Roy Black, hired a Florida psychologist, Steve Strumwasser, to evaluate his client.

“I assessed Rush, and I saw he had a problem he couldn’t control,” Strumwasser told me in a phone interview authorized by Limbaugh. “I knew his name and what he did for a living, but that’s about it.”

Strumwasser recommended that Limbaugh check into the Meadows, in Wickenburg, Ariz., a rehab center that specializes in celebrities.

“They guarded his privacy, but other than that, he was treated like everybody else,” said Strumwasser, who traveled with him to Arizona and checked him in. “Rush did individual therapy, took part in group sessions and got along with everybody.”

According to Strumwasser, Limbaugh had previously tried twice to stop using drugs on his own and failed. “It takes most people a lot of time to assume personal responsibility for an addiction,” he said. “Especially in a case like this, where there is a professional risk involved. But by the time I met him, Rush wasn’t denying his problem at all. He went about getting better in a very passionate way.”

The passion was muted when Limbaugh returned to the air, after six weeks. He candidly but drily, discussed his addiction and legal status, told his listeners that he was not a victim and then went on with the broadcast.

In the studio the day we spoke, Limbaugh was more emotional. “I thank God for my addiction,” he told me. “It made me understand my shortcomings.”

Being Limbaugh, he said he believes that most of these shortcomings stemmed from his inability to love himself sufficiently. "I felt everyone who criticized me was right and I was wrong," he confided. But, he says, he left his insecurities behind in Arizona. "It's not possible to offend me now," he said. "I won't give people the power to do it anymore. My problem was born of immaturity and my childhood desire for acceptance. I learned in drug rehab that this was stunting and unrealistic. I was seeking acceptance from the wrong people."

Limbaugh told me he is no longer concerned about the opinions of his colleagues and rivals, and he makes no effort to disguise his contempt for most of them. [Michael Savage](#), ranked No. 3 among talk-radio hosts by Talkers magazine? "He's not even in my rearview mirror." [Garrison Keillor](#)? "I don't even know where to find NPR on the dial."

At dinner the night before, [Bill O'Reilly](#)'s name came up, and Limbaugh expressed his opinion of the Fox cable king. He hadn't been sure at the time that he wanted it on the record. But on second thought, "somebody's got to say it," he told me. "The man is Ted Baxter."

Limbaugh does have his favorites. He admires [Ann Coulter](#)'s ability to outrage liberals. He is a fan of the columnists Camille Paglia and Thomas Sowell, both of whom he considers honest thinkers. And he is especially impressed by the essays of [Christopher Hitchens](#). "He's misguided sometimes, but when you read him, you finish the whole article."

Limbaugh has a deeply conflicted attitude toward Sean Hannity, his one-time stand in and now perpetual No. 2 on the Talkers list. He speaks of the younger man with the same condescending affection that Muhammad Ali once showed Jimmy Ellis, a former sparring partner turned challenger. But he wanted me to remember who is the Greatest. "I have no competitors," he said. "Hannity isn't even close to me."

Hannity became a touchy issue in the late spring. For more than a year he was on what appeared to be a quixotic campaign to raise the issue of Obama's controversial pastor, [Jeremiah Wright](#). Then the story exploded. Not only that, Hannity also led the pack on Obama's connection to the former Weatherman leader William Ayers. Operation Chaos was still garnering attention and amusing listeners, but the election news was being made elsewhere.

From New York, I sent Limbaugh a teasing e-mail message: "Hannity has been first and hardest on the Reverend Wright controversy and the Bill Ayers thing. Is it possible that he is running a separate Operation Chaos with superior intel?"

Limbaugh didn't dispute that Hannity was first on the Wright and Ayers controversies. But, he wrote: "Things only take off when I mention them. That is the point."

Two weeks later, The Daily Telegraph in London published a list of America's most-influential pundits. Limbaugh finished fourth, behind Hannity. Once again I wrote a message to Limbaugh: "Are we looking at a changing of the guard on the right side of the dial?"

Limbaugh scoffed. "Since when have I cared what the media says?" he wrote. "Media polls are not the measure. Ratings 'polls' and revenue are. And it still ain't close."

I couldn't resist. "I wasn't asking about the media," I wrote him. "I was asking about Hannity. Hannity can fairly take credit (as he does now, every night) for being more influential than any other commentator in changing the course of this election. That strikes me as new. Or am I wrong?"

At which point Limbaugh, who patiently and graciously answered dozens of my questions, allowed me to invade his bunker and his castle, shared hours of his time, permitted me access to his closest family and most-intimate friends, even his therapist, had enough. "Write what you want," he snapped across cyberspace.

AS A BOY, Rush Limbaugh always preferred the company of adults, and it seems to me he doesn't consider liberals to be real grown-ups. "They are destructive of the institutions and traditions that make this country great," he says. "I want to reduce them to a small group. I want no more than 10 to 15 of them in Congress."

Limbaugh has no illusions that this will be the result of the 2008 election. "Real conservatism wins every time it's tried," he told me. "But the party has abandoned conservatives as a base. McCain doesn't want to criticize Democrats; he wants Democrats to vote for him."

The oddity is that Limbaugh himself makes this strategy possible. Why, after all, should John McCain take the low road, antagonize independents and become embroiled in racial controversy when he can count on Limbaugh to become the G.O.P.'s most-effective unofficial Obama Criticizer?

If McCain wins, Limbaugh will spend the next four years tugging him to the right. If he loses, it will not be, in Limbaugh's estimation, Limbaugh's fault, and it won't be the end of his world either. A secret of Limbaugh's success is that his uncompromising, often harsh ideas are offset by a basically friendly temperament. He is less like his angry father than his mature role models, Buckley and Reagan, for whom sociability and fun were integral to their conservative world view.

And increasingly, he has other interests. He's been spending more time with his extended family in Cape Girardeau, where he's so popular that the municipality runs a Rush Limbaugh tour for visitors. He toys with the idea of buying an [N.F.L.](#) franchise. His friend Joel Surnow says that if there were a Rush Limbaugh movie, it would be something along the lines of "Citizen Kane" meets Howard Stern.

As for politics, Rush has already picked his candidate for the Conservative Restoration: Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) of Louisiana, a 37-year-old prodigy whom Limbaugh considers to be a genuine movement conservative in the Ronald Reagan mold — "fresh, energetic and optimistic in his view of America." In the meantime, though, there's the Democratic convention in Denver to muck around in, and then the main event in November. Operation Chaos is over, but Rush will come up with something new to delight his fans and infuriate his foes. Presidents rise and presidents fall, but "The Rush Limbaugh Show" will go on, weekdays at 12:06, Eastern Time.

Zev Chafets is a frequent contributor to the magazine. His last cover story was about Mike Huckabee.

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