

Rush-hour frustration

by Susan_Estrich

He talks for hours every day. He gets paid to talk. Just talk. Doing it well is no small thing; witness the number of people who have tried to be him, or be the NOT-him, and failed. But he doesn't have to build a coalition. He doesn't need the votes of the other side to earn his check. He doesn't have to write the legislation, convince Olympia Snowe, raise money to keep the lights on, put his name on the ballot. All the things he doesn't have to do give him the freedom to be as effective as he is at what he does.

Trying to beat him at his own game when your own game is played by a different set of rules is a losing proposition. He knows that.

The Republican Party's chairman and even some of my Democratic friends need to remember that.

When I first started doing talk radio, I listened to Rush Limbaugh in the morning to figure out how to do it. I don't mean, obviously, that I studied Rush to figure out my positions on issues; I've been doing issues my whole life. I studied him to figure out how to do radio — how to talk about issues in a way that engages people, creates a community of the audience, makes them want to hear more, connect, join the club. Rush is wrong on almost everything, by my lights, but the lessons I took from him weren't about substance, but about craft. By my lights, no one is better at it.

To dismiss Rush as mere "entertainment," as Michael Steele, the Republican Party's chairman, did this weekend, understates his abilities and influence. To a very large extent, all of us who do television news or politics are in the business of entertainment. President Barack Obama's speech craft is a form of entertainment. Fox News (for whom I work) has mastered a sort of lively and engaging approach to delivering news that, regardless of the content or what you think of the perspective, is quite simply more fun to watch than many of its competitors. The best and most successful news-oriented Web sites are also, frankly, creative and engaging and, yes, entertaining.

But he is not the leader of the Republican Party. He may be the guru; he is certainly a powerful voice. But his job is not to write the opposing bill, to decide when to compromise and when not to, to participate in the process of making the sausage. He doesn't need to reach out to the middle, the way politicians do. Calling him "the voice and the intellectual force and energy behind the Republican Party," as Rahm Emanuel did, only gets him more attention and more power, and it makes it more difficult, not less, for the Republicans, whose votes the president ultimately needs, to defy his naysaying.

That is not to say Rush should go unchallenged or unanswered. The blogosphere is full of smart, savvy, creative progressive voices, who can and should engage Rush. Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann should give him their best. It always has disappointed me, frankly, that there are so many Rush wannabes filling the radio waves and so few opposing voices.

One of the many decisions I regret in life was the one I made to turn down a very generous offer to fill the hours against Rush on what was then Los Angeles' major talk station; I said no because I was too loyal to the host I would be replacing. That host ultimately was replaced anyway and insisted on my weekend slot when he did. So much for misguided loyalty.

But the fact that Steele felt the need to apologize to Rush attests to the fact that it was a mistake to attack him in the first place. The attention Rush is getting right now from the White House chief of staff and the chairman of the Republican Party will increase Rush's ratings, but it is far from clear to me that it will make it any easier for Republicans to cross the line and vote with the president. Harder, I would think. Rush wins this game, which is why those who play on a different field should stay away from his.

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