# US talk shows sound an echo of Rwanda

**By Philip Smucker**
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Radio host Sean Hannity asks a guest to talk about the American military's abuse of Iraqi prisoners and "maybe compare it to the beheading of Nick Berg." The guest, in deference to good taste or out of respect for the grieving Berg family, refuses.

Still, for several weeks now, right wing radio talk show hosts, like Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage – who dominate the airwaves and much of the political debate across the American heartland – have been hammering home the idea that our enemies are far more inhumane than anyone on the U.S. side. For observers familiar with the rhetoric that dominated Balkan and Rwandan airwaves during the hate and war crimes in those two regions, the strident, accusatory language of American radio sounds a troubling echo.

War propaganda – as a rule – involves a dehumanization of the enemy to the point where killing and torture seems not only justified but down-right patriotic. But the unexpected spoke in the wheel for Limbaugh, Hannity, Savage and company is that American soldiers are now seen in vivid photographs dehumanizing Iraqi prisoners in the basest ways – forcing their charges to engage in sex acts and beaming over the corpses of prisoners.

This does not fit with the image these commentators have sought to project of the American soldier; selfless, brave men and women facing down "evildoers" and extending the U.S. values of freedom and liberty in the Middle East.

Understandably, it has been hard for these radio hosts to now talk in a serious way about the shocking pictures coming out of Abu Ghraib. Even loyal Limbaugh listeners were thrown into a suspended state of disbelief by the bizarre comments of their host this month when he agreed with one caller that the prison abuse was similar to a fraternity prank.

"Exactly my point!" Limbaugh growled in his endearing baritone, comparing it, himself, to a "Skull and Bones" fraternity initiation. Hinting at the designs of the liberal establishment, the radio host bemoaned: "We're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them

(the abusing soldiers) because they had a good time." The host was apparently accusing the outraged "libs" of raining on a fun party in the Arabian desert. The clear suggestion was that anyone overly-concerned should just leave the soldiers to their sadistic ways – damn the Geneva Conventions.

On another day, Limbaugh called for a just a little more understanding for the accused. "Are we forgetting who is in these prisons?" he asked. "These are prisoners who have attempted to kill Americans." Limbaugh did not mention that U.S. military officers had told the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) that they believed upwards of 70 percent of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib were mere "suspects" and had not attacked US soldiers.

In his May 11 and May 12 radio show Savage Nation, Michael Savage called Arabs "non-humans" and "racist, fascist bigots." The Clear Channel syndicated radio host later asserted that Americans should "drop a nuclear weapon" on a random Arab capital, and that "these people" in the Middle East "need to be forcibly converted to Christianity" in order to "turn them into human beings." Without skipping a beat, Savage on May 14 downplays Iraqi prisoner abuses at the hands of American military personnel: "I think it's a very good policy, and the more I learn about it I think that it made good sense. . . . Use little women in particular. Little, ugly women. And let 'em take big strapping Iraqis and put 'em on leashes naked. . . Get police dogs to bark at naked Iraqis, until they crack . . ."

"These radio hosts should take note of something that happened six months ago in a courtroom in Tanazania," says British journalist Jake Lynch, co-director of the peace journalism think-tank Reporting the World. "For the first time, radio broadcasts were legally deemed to be war crimes."

Lynch is referring to the Rwandan genocide tribunal, which in December 2003 handed down convictions to three prime movers of Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), the hate broadcaster implicated in fanning the flames of tribal hatred in 1994, leading to the deaths of up to 800,000. In the weeks prior to the mass killings in Rwanda, RTLM repeatedly characterized the rival Tutsis as "cockroaches".

"It was RTLM's relentless dehumanization of the 'enemy' that was adjudged as an incitement to violence," Lynch says. "The hateful messages reaching listeners across the US today are dangerous in the same way. Our own intensively mediated societies are also vulnerable to such baleful messages, if repeated often enough."

A similar abuse of the airwaves rang from the Balkans in the 1980s and 90s, under the now defunct regime of Slobadan Milosevic. Milosevic's control over the former Yugoslavia was underwritten by powerful individuals in the mainstream Serbian media who highlighted the "victimization" of the Serb nation on the one hand and the excessive evil deeds of the

enemy on the other. The strong man's loyalists presented Serbian crimes against Muslims and Croats as little more than lies and exaggerations promoted by the enemy.

While right-wing radio quickly seized upon the beheading of Nick Berg to highlight the wretched deeds of the enemy, Limbaugh predicted that liberal politicians would now make "an effort to get Nick Berg's family in Philadelphia to go public and say, 'if it weren't for the Bush Administration, our son, whatever, would still be alive.'"

Despite his forecast, it was the nationally syndicated talk-radio host, Glenn Beck who ended up calling Nick Berg's dad a "scumbag" when – with no visible prompting – the enraged father blamed his son's death on the "Sins of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld."

(Mr. Berg's beheading did factor into the waning public support for the war, according to TIME Magazine. A story titled "Collateral Damage" asserted that the young Jewish idealist's death "reset the moral equivalence meter" in the land of the free – at least momentarily.)

In addition to dehumanizing the "enemy," the AM talk radio hosts openly questioned the patriotism of liberals and members of the press, whom they accused of grossly sensationalizing the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. As far as Limbaugh – no avowed McCarthyite – was concerned these unpatriotic Americans were the moral equivalent of the "evildoers" themselves. "There are people in this country who may not be on the side of the terrorists in Iraq, but their actions wouldn't be any different if they were, and those are Democrats and liberals who are anti-U.S. military and anti-victory," he stated on air.

Even as Limbaugh and others fumbled to come to terms with the horrors of Abu Ghraib, their loyalists spoke up. National Review Online contributor, Kate O'Beirne, chirped that Limbaugh, in saying that the prison abuse was "no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation," had only been trying in humorous way, (lost on dull-witted listeners,) to taunt the "media given their contempt for how Bush spent his years in New Haven," (the home of Yale University.)

For all the wild radio raving over the Abu Ghraib scandal, it may have been a calm psychologist quoted by Newsweek Online who shed the most light on the moral majority's perplexed reaction. "I think there is an issue of loss going on," said Mike Milburn, author of "The Politics of Denial." There's a really powerful political myth about the United States; we're the land of the free, the home of the brave. We go out with honor and bring freedom to Iraq, and so on. These kinds of photographs really threaten the validity of the myth."

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