

Eric Seidel helped usher in the age of conservative talk radio. But it was never about a political revolution.

BY DOUG MONROE

# IT'S THE RATINGS STUPID

SLUGGO AND I ARE laughing. We are in the den of his East Cobb home listening to right-wing talk radio, and a caller to Neal Boortz on WSB complains about the lack of black characters on some TV shows.

"You know why there're no Muslims on *Star Trek*?" Boortz responds. "Because it takes place in the future."

As we laugh at the politically incorrect war joke, Sluggo argues that talk show hosts such as Boortz and Rush Limbaugh are popular, in part, because they're funny. "See?" he says. "It's stuff like that."

I have invited myself over for a day of radio after Democrats Tom Daschle and Al Gore unloaded on the talk shows. Daschle said Limbaugh's fans threatened his family. Gore complained that the shows were part of the Republican publicity apparatus. My friend Sluggo has one of the best perspectives on the Democratic criticisms because he is Eric Seidel, one of the architects of conservative talk radio in Atlanta.

"They don't get it," he says. "The Republicans have done a very good job of understanding how powerful talk radio can be. I think that's scapegoating on the part of Democrats. They haven't broken the code."

Seidel helped write the code. In his heyday as station manager of WGST a



dozen years ago, he introduced the shows of Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and Kim Peterson to Atlanta. Seidel brought in Hannity as the morning talk show host on WGST after Boortz bolted for WSB. Today Hannity co-hosts *Hannity & Colmes* on the Fox News Channel, hosts a syndicated radio show and has written a best-selling book, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty Over Liberalism*, in which he acknowledges Seidel's boost to his career.

"Aren't you ashamed?" I ask.

"I'm very proud that I met the needs of the metropolitan Atlanta population," says Seidel, who now trains executives for media interviews. "This is a conservative market."

When I arrive at Seidel's home, we first

listen to Boortz, who nicknamed Seidel "Sluggo" after the villain on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Mr. Bill Show."

The author of *The Terrible Truth About Liberals*, Boortz is insensitive and politically incorrect, Seidel says, "but I also like the fact that he is not a goose-stepping conservative. He's pro-choice. He's not predictable."

He's not predictable, that is, except when it comes to ranting about liberals. And that he always talks in terribly long sentences, such as this day when Boortz goes on a long rant, telling his listeners to look at posts on a Democratic Web site. "You will shudder at the hatred that these people have for those of you who have gone out there and truly bust-

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ed your rear ends and worked those 60-hour weeks and paid attention to your education and your job skills and made good decisions and ended up wealthy and they hate your guts for it," he says without once coming up for air. "And they want the government to take it away from you and give it to them."

After Boortz, we turn to Limbaugh, who is also railing about liberals. Seidel put his syndicated program on WGST in 1990.

"Look at liberalism today," says Lim-

several times a day as a wide cast of characters. Today's call purports to be an Alzheimer's-addled "Charlton Heston."

Kimmer: "Let's see who's on the line."

Heston: "Hello. Who's this?"

Kimmer: "It's Charlton Heston!"

Heston: "This is Carly Simon. You're so vain you probably think this call is about you."

Kimmer: "Sir, you're not Carly Simon."

Heston: "Well, who am I?"

From there Kimmer is off on a long-winded rant, some ludicrous thing about Bill Clinton dating Demi Moore and how he's going to dump that "skank-

"Liberals still have power," he says. "The greatest liberal power lever is political correctness. If you violate the rules of political correctness, the liberals will slam you."

The liberal contingency can do a hit every now and then, as in the case of Trent Lott, but it doesn't hold a candle to the daily pounding from the radio right. Conservative talk show hosts helped elect the president and both houses of Congress. They're on top of the world, yet they still rant about liberals as if George McGovern were president instead of George W. Bush.

I think their rage is partly driven by the browning demographics of America versus the graying demographics of their audience. I think they can hear footsteps. In Atlanta, according to Scarborough Research, 27 percent of adults listen to news/talk radio. The median age of news/talk listeners nationally is 52.

Some people in that middle-age bracket are losing their jobs, their medical insurance and their 401(k)s in the fallout from a weakening economy. I wonder how talk-show listeners feel if they're suddenly jobless. Who do they blame? Where do they direct their rage?

God forbid they should need some help. Who would they listen to then? ★

## Liberals tend to be preachy, he says, while conservatives use humor and give their audiences what they want to hear, just like gossip over a fence.

baugh. "Look at Jimmy Carter, arguably the biggest failure in the modern Democratic Party. He's their hero today. A guy who hasn't done one thing right except maybe hammer nails. He got the Nobel Peace Prize for one reason: It looked bad for George W. Bush."

Limbaugh airs a comedy sketch of a pathetic Daschle hosting a talk show and bragging that he got two calls in one hour—"and they're not both Al Gore!"

I ask Seidel why conservatives dominate talk radio. I mention Mike Malloy, a liberal who used to be on WSB. Seidel says there was one problem with Malloy's show—it wasn't entertaining. Liberals tend to be preachy, he says, while conservatives use humor and give their audiences what they want to hear, just like gossip over a fence.

At 3 p.m., we listen to Kim "The Kimmer" Peterson on WGST. Seidel hired Peterson in 1992, thinking the respected broadcast journalist would host a serious, news-oriented program. It is as if Dr. Frankenstein thought he was creating an accountant.

"I didn't know about Kimmer's other personality," Seidel says.

An ex-Marine, Peterson turned the show into a crazed fiesta of right-wing militarism and goofy comedy. Seidel hooked him up with Jim Gossett, an impressionist and comedian, who calls

face Hill Babes" and how he must have venereal diseases "up the pockalagongala." It's all distasteful and repulsive and, really, not even very funny.

But Peterson's berserk performance feeds on the right's never-ending obsession with the Clintons. All of the hosts exploit the gut-level division between left and right in America. The conservatives make themselves sound so . . . right. There are no shades of gray. No doubts. No shortage of liberals to blame and ridicule. And there are no liberal talk radio shows to counterbalance them. Listeners accept the Hannitys and Boortzes of the world as the messengers of political gospel when, in fact, talk radio is *not* about politics; it's about entertainment, it's about doing whatever it takes to jack up the ratings.

After Kimmer, we turn to 1230 AM/1340 AM to listen to the syndicated Michael Savage. Listening to Savage is like being attacked by a dog. He growls that "the lemmings on the left are trying to undermine the Republicans."

I've had enough. Yes, there's humor and music. Yes, Democrats are bores. Yes, I'm as sick of political correctness as the next guy. But the message of these shows is always the same. I say to Seidel: "It's a drumbeat about liberals. Liberals aren't in charge of anything anymore. Why do they even bother?"

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