

"Lies And The Lying Liars Who Tell Them"; Humorist Al Franken Discussed His Newest Book And Politics In General

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HIGHLIGHT: Humorist Al Franken discussed his newest book "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right."

In his newest book, "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right," former "Saturday Night Live" comic Al Franken takes on Rupert Murdoch, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, the Wall Street Journal and a multitude of others.

Franken was online to discuss the book, politics and his career.

The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Lexington Park, Md.: No need to post. I just wanted to say BRAVO for the book and for taking on that bully Bill O'Reilly. Three cheers for the funny guy!

Al Franken: Thanks. I'm very happy with the book. And I'm very happy with the outcome of the Fox suit, but I want my "Fair and Balanced" Tour to be about the book and not about the stupid, stupid lawsuit. I'm getting great responses on hw the book takes apart the right-wing media and the Bush Administration.

Alexandria, Va.: Hey Al, have you endorsed a presidential candidate yet?

Al Franken: No, I haven't. I like a lot of the Democratic candidates, and think there are three or four who could beat Bush in 2004, depending, of course, on events. But I really believe that Bush's facade of credibility is crumbling and will never be put back together again. I really think he's in trouble.

New York, N.Y.: Do you have any disagreements with Barbara Streissand or Phil Donahue?

Al Franken: You know, I do have a number of disagreements with other liberals, especially some Hollywood celebrities. You know, Hollywood celebrities can make such a big difference on issues like the environment. For example, not too many people realize it, but Hollywood celebrities make up just .0000000001% of the world's population, and yet consume nearly 37% of its resources. For example, every day, 17 acres of rainforest are consumed by Barbra Streisand alone.

Denver, Colo.: Al, Are you going to host your own radio show, as part of the proposed "liberal" radio network? I hope you do. Your book is brilliant, and it's about time someone put the right wing in its lowly, miserable place.

Al Franken: First, thanks for saying my book is brilliant. That's an important message to get across here on this online chat. And, by the way, for those of you in the Washington area, I will be answering questions and discussing the book at the Border's at Bailey's Crossroads on Thursday, September 4, at 7:30 pm. Now that that's out of the way, I am very seriously considering doing a radio show, and working with people who are trying to put together a liberal radio network. I just want to make sure we can get enough clearances and be talking to enough people to make it worth everyone's while.

Ithaca, N.Y.: Some people have questioned your seriousness, others have questioned your comedy. Are you actually funny?

Al Franken: Yes.

Alexandria, Va.: I loved "Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot." I was wondering if you have met Rush since you wrote the book. If so, was the meeting more congenial than your meeting with Bill O'Reilly? Also, I noticed that Rush lost a significant amount of weight not long after the book came out -- do you think you might be able to work public humiliation into a diet fad?

Al Franken: Actually, I'm sure Rush lost the weight because of my book. Essentially, I saved his life. And he hasn't thanked me. This whole O'Reilly experience has given me some renewed respect for Rush. You know, I had my editor send Rush a copy of that book about a month before it came out with a note saying, "Dear Rush: Al thinks it would help sales if you mentioned the book on your show." He never did, which I think showed some emotional maturity.

New York, N.Y.: Why should we believe anything that you say when you have had to publicly apologize to both the Attorney General of the United States and to Harvard University for what is at best a lie and pernicious deception? Did

Harvard demand the public apology? What does it say about the mental condition of an admitted liar who keeps calling other people liars? Are you in therapy for your rage? Why do you need other people's names on your books in order to sell them? Why am I wasting my time doing this?

Al Franken: I think if you read the book, you'll see that the letter to Ashcroft is what we in comedy call a "prank." In no way was I misleading my readers. In the letter, I told Ashcroft (and 27 others who I sent the letter to) that I was writing a book called "Savin' It!" about abstinence-only education, and that I was looking for "abstinence heroes" to tell their abstinence stories. Of course, I didn't receive any, probably because they are hypocrites and were not abstinent themselves. Or maybe they just understood that it was a joke. My only mistake was putting it on Harvard stationery, where I was a fellow, but I shouldn't have done that. Thank you for your question.

Charlottesville, Va.: I loved the book, but why all the vitriol? In one of your earlier books you included a short chapter in which you envisioned an army division of elderly retirees advancing on an enemy stronghold. Your point was that it was better to talk about solutions (i.e. social security funding and the lack of enrolment in the armed forces) rather than complain about the problems. Where are the solutions in this book?

Al Franken: What vitriol, you son of a b****!?!?!?!?! I don't think the "sending-the-elderly-into-space" bit in the Rush book was an actual, realistic solution. I do think that if you read my book, you'll see that I'm talking about things like a fairer tax cut that REALLY goes to those at the bottom, actually funding No Child Left Behind, and finally, being honest.

Laurel, Md.: Did you know, during your days together on SNL, that Dennis Miller was a closet right-winger?

Al Franken: Dennis is heterosexual. And has two great kids. Huh? What? Oh? I didn't understand the question.

New York, N.Y.: Would you consider voting for the Green Party? It certainly seems to show more consistency and backbone in taking on the Rabid Right than any other major "opposition."

Al Franken: No. I think Nader, for example, cost Gore the election. Make that I KNOW he cost Gore the election. Our country would be a lot better off today if Nader had simply told people not to vote for him in swing states.

Annandale, Va.: Are there any right-wingers of whom you've criticized/made fun of in the past that have redeemed themselves in your eyes? That is, do you have a higher opinion of certain politicians now than you have had in the past?

Al Franken: I've made fun of Bob Dole in the past and still think there's some spotty things there, but I do like him. There are plenty of conservatives that I have respect for, including people like John McCain, David Brooks (the Weekly Standard writer), and Terry Bradshaw.

Jacksonville, Fla.: I think you should send Roger Ailes and company a nice fruit basket.

Al Franken: I have an idea. Why don't we ALL send Roger Ailes fruit baskets?

Lyme, Ct.: Would you vote for Joe Lieberman over George Bush?

Al Franken: Yeah. Are you kidding?

Chicago, Ill.: Al: I'm studying psychology. I've read that a humorous response to serious issues covers up a lack of true knowledge. May I have your response on this.

Al Franken: That's a funny comment.

Chicago, Ill.: Hi Al, I admire your work. How would you respond to today's column by Howard Kurtz where he writes: "Gigot says he offered to respond if Franken would send him the details, but the comedian never did." Is this true or is it another case of media bias, or, do you think he simply didn't have space to include your response?

Al Franken: I wish Howard had called me and asked me about this, because what Gigot said was just not true. It went down exactly as I describe in the book. I asked him whether he read all the editorials printed on the page, and he said, "I am responsible for all the editorials on the page." Then I said, "So you don't?" And he said, "Al, I'm responsible for all the editorials." And I said, "Good. Then you're responsible for this one," and I referred to the 2/3/03 editorial that is in my book. I did not refer him to any other editorials. Further, I did tell him I was writing a book, and he did say, "You just want to say you caught Paul Gigot unable to defend one of his editorials to sell more books." He either just remembers this

differently or is, well, I guess, lying. It's very disappointing; in the instance described in the book, I felt he was just embarrassed about the 2/3/03 editorial and didn't want to respond. This is quite different.

Hauppauge, N.Y.: Is Bill Clinton a more honest man than Bush? Why?

Al Franken: It's one thing to lie about sex in the Oval Office, which I admit is bad. It is another thing to deliberately mislead the American people about why we're going to war. I think there was a case to be made to go to war in Iraq, and that we should have been treated like adults. I will be going on my fourth USO tour this Christmas - this time to Afghanistan and Iraq. I love our troops and so do the American people. I think we'd be much more willing to cut Bush slack on what's going to be a long, difficult rebuilding period if he had been truthful with us in the first place.

Washington, D.C.: Any chance you will be on This Week again?

Al Franken: Did you see that? George Will looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but with me in a studio. So, probably not. But I do like the show, and even have respect for Will's intelligence and talent, though I almost always disagree with him and thought he was a little rude that day. I called him a few days later and told him as much, and we had a nice conversation. But don't expect me on anytime soon.

Arlington, Va.: Gore cost himself the election. All he had to do was win his own home state of Tennessee, or Clinton's home state of Arkansas, and he would have won the election. Don't blame the Greens.

Al Franken: As James Carville has said, "Bush lost his home country." I think Gore actually won the election, frankly, and if you care about the issues that the Greens say they care about, I don't understand how you can not admit that this president is a disaster.

Reston, Va.: Why is the supposition of lying always on the other party in your mind, as in the case of Paul Gigot? Why should we believe you?

Al Franken: Good question. Read my book. You decide.

Clifton, Va.: I thought I heard you say in an interview the other day that you and Gary Bauer are great friends--is that correct? Can you shed some light on what

good qualities he might have? I've never been a fan of the guy based on the public agenda he pursues but I have an open mind.

Al Franken: First of all, I hope Gary doesn't mind my saying this. He is a sincere man, which I always respect. He has a wonderful sense of humor, and lives a life consistent with his values. He has a great family; he's moved his mother in with them (something I would never do). I'm friends with lots of people who have very divergent views from mine.

Washington, D.C.: Al, Love your writing and love your humor. How much are you involved with the Democratic Party? Have you ever considered running for an office? I know you won the Presidency and slept through it, but maybe Senator would be good too.

Al Franken: I am a Democrat, and support Democrats, and do fundraising for Democrats. I don't think I'm going to run for public office anytime soon, because I would be crushed by the enormous responsibility.

Virginia: You Democrats need to get over the election. I'm not a Republican, but Bush won, fair and square with the rules of the game. If it was based on the popular vote, then sure, Gore would be president, but it's not. Plus, when the votes were counted in Florida by all the news media outlets after the Supreme Court ruling, Bush still came out on top.

Al Franken: Actually, that's not true. If the overvotes or undervotes were counted, Gore would have won Florida. Also, there was a lot of chicanery on the part of the Republicans. May I suggest Jeffrey Toobin's "Too Close to Call" if you're actually interested?

Louisville, Ky.: A moment ago someone asked why we should believe you when you say someone is lying. You told the questioner to read the book and then said, "You decide." But aren't the words "you decide" a trademark of Fox News?

Al Franken: Yes. Hopefully, they'll sue me. I just learned yesterday that my book will be #1 on the New York Times best-seller list next Sunday, so it would help if they waited a few weeks before filing their complaint.

Al Franken: Thanks, everybody. Once again, for everyone in the DC area, I'll be at the Borders at Bailey's Crossroads on Thursday, September 4, at 7:30. I'll be speaking, answering questions, and signing books. It's actually the kickoff book signing on my "Fair and Balanced" Tour 2003. See you all there!
