

Interview With Al Franken; Interview With William Saletan

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(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

HOWARD KURTZ, HOST (voice-over): No laughing matter. Al Franken beats up on Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter, Paul Gigot, and George W. Bush. How did the comedian become a liberal bomb thrower? And, is his book as shrill as the conservatives he criticizes?

Carping at Kerry: why is the press castigating the Massachusetts senator's campaign while pumping up Howard Dean?

And the media and the 9/11 anniversary: how much is enough?

(END VIDEOTAPE)

KURTZ: Welcome to RELIABLE SOURCES. I'm Howard Kurtz.

Today, we turn our critical lens on a guest who has been all over the tube the last few weeks. Before the groaning (ph) begins, a look inside the spin cycle.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

KURTZ (voice-over): Once he wrote jokes for a hot Saturday night show, then stepped onto the small screen himself. Now, Al Franken is still trying to make people laugh and promote his book about liars, liars that is of the conservative variety.

AL FRANKEN, AUTHOR: I've spent my entire career being a satirist. If I'm not a satirist, Bill O'Reilly isn't a journ -- OK, well, maybe that's not the best argument, but it's just stupid.

KURTZ: O'Reilly, he is that Fox guy who's behind the network's failed lawsuit against Franken for stealing the slogan "fair and balanced," and according to knowledgeable sources, these guys don't like each other.

BILL O'REILLY, FOX NEWS ANCHOR: He writes it in his book. He tries to make me out to be...

FRANKEN: No, no, no, no, no.

O'REILLY: Hey, shut up. You had your 35 minutes. Shut up.

KURTZ: But it's not just O'Reilly. Franken has a rather dim view of many of his adversaries on the right.

AARON BROWN, CNN ANCHOR: Quickly, word association. Tom DeLay?

FRANKEN: Exterminator.

BROWN: Newt Gingrich?

FRANKEN: Large.

BROWN: Ann Coulter?

FRANKEN: Lying -- it's one word?

KURTZ: Is Franken fair and balanced in his criticism? We play sound bites, you decide. Check out his stint as a guest host on that low-key program, "CROSSFIRE."

FRANKEN: What exactly does this mean for the president? It means that his coalition of disgraced energy executives, gun dealers, Confederate flag lovers and other white guys with prostate problems won't be enough to get Bush a majority. It looks like he may have to steal this election like he did in 2000.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

KURTZ: And joining us now is the author of "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them," Al Franken -- welcome.

FRANKEN: Thank you, Howard.

KURTZ: Once you were writing material for John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd and you were playing the Stuart Smalley character on TV.

FRANKEN: Right.

KURTZ: And now you write serious books bashing conservatives. What happened?

FRANKEN: Well, they're serious, but they're also funny. And I use a lot of the chops I learned at "Saturday Night Live," comedy chops. And when I was at "Saturday Night Live," I wrote a lot of Danny playing Nixon or Danny playing Carter, and I did a lot of political stuff at "SNL," stuff I'm very proud of.

KURTZ: But the book in some places sounds angry. Are you an angry white guy?

FRANKEN: I'm white. I don't think I'm an angry person. I think I'm a person who's angry.

I'm angry at the Bush administration; I'm angry at the right wing media. And by that I don't mean the media is right wing. I mean, there is a part of the media that's not the mainstream media. That's Fox, that is "The Wall Street Journal" editorial page. You know who they are. You are familiar with them.

KURTZ: And you say talk radio and "The New York Post."

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: But look, you know, most people would say -- many people would say -- that "The New York Times," "The Washington Post," NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN are left of center. I mean, these other...

FRANKEN: They're wrong.

KURTZ: They're wrong?

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: They're not left of center?

FRANKEN: No.

KURTZ: They're fair and balanced?

FRANKEN: They're much more fair and balanced than the people who evidently own the trademark to "fair and balanced." Look, if you look at the coverage of the 2000 race, Gore did not get the better of it; Bush got the better of it. And the mainstream media has all kinds of biases, as you have written eloquently about through the years, of pack mentality, of sensationalism, of cheap.

You know, what's cheaper than two guys talking, OK? But instead of doing policy, it's all horse race and process. There's all kinds...

KURTZ: But not ideologically, you're saying?

FRANKEN: No.

KURTZ: Not pro-Democratic, you're saying?

FRANKEN: No, I think asking the question whether the mainstream media has a liberal or conservative bias is like asking whether al Qaeda uses too much oil in

their humus. I might think they use a little bit too much oil; some people might think it's a little dry. But the problem with al Qaeda is they want to kill us. And the problem with the mainstream media is that it has these other biases that are much more important.

However, there is a right wing media that does have a bias and it does have an agenda. And in order to pursue that agenda, it lies and it cheats.

KURTZ: You spent a lot of time in this book on FOX News, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity. But do you think that every journalist who works for FOX News wakes up every morning thinking, "How can I push forward the conservative agenda?"

FRANKEN: I think that at Fox, the heads of Fox do. And I think they send out memos saying so.

KURTZ: But don't you think that some of the reporters are good reporters? Some of the reporters used to work at CNN.

FRANKEN: Yes, I think there are good reporters. But I think that by and large, if you look at the whole balance of what their network is -- yes, there are so many ironies to Fox's suit against me, and one of which is that they trademarked "fair and balanced." I mean, it's ridiculous.

And, by the way, the judge said their case was wholly without merit on the facts and on the law. And Joe Conason called me and said, "I think the judge may have inadvertently given them their new trademark: "The Fox News Channel: Wholly Without Merit."

KURTZ: Well, I doubt they'll be adopting that. You argue in the book that -- and you just made the point about the 2000 election and the media, led by the conservative press or driven by the conservative press help put Bush in office.

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: But he remains a pretty popular president. So is that the media's doing?

FRANKEN: Yes, I think to some extent.

KURTZ: If it weren't for the media, there's no way that people would be supporting the president?

FRANKEN: Well, first of all, he isn't that popular a president. His re-elects are well under 50 now. And I think that his -- finally, the press has gotten their pecker back and are going after him.

But, I mean, after 9/11, you know, everyone was afraid to be called -- you know, one thing the right wing media has done to the mainstream media is put the mainstream media on the defensive about being called "liberal."

KURTZ: Talk about your kind of -- what I would call your in- your-face style. Why did you call up Rich Lowry, editor of the "National Review," and challenge him to a fight?

FRANKEN: OK. What happened was I saw Rich Lowry, who is, as these conservative writers go, I think pretty good. And I saw him on C-SPAN and he said that Republicans had sissified -- Democrats, Democrats had sissified politics. So that's why I called him up the next day at his office. And he said, "What do I owe this call to?" And I said, "Rich, would you like to fight?" And he said, "I'm sorry, fight? Where we would fight?" And I said, "I don't know, in my parking garage."

And he said, "What would the rules be?" And I said, "No rules, it would be like 'Fight Club,' and whoever says 'uncle' pays the other guy \$1,000 to his charity. And I can't imagine that after you call Democrats sissified that you would turn down a challenge to a fight."

KURTZ: By the way, he declined that challenge.

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: And gave you some material for your book.

FRANKEN: That's not why I did it. I didn't challenge him in a parking garage to a fight, as you implied in your article in "The Post."

KURTZ: Let's talk about John Ashcroft. You apologized to the attorney general for sending him a letter on the stationery of Harvard Shorenstein Center...

FRANKEN: Which I regret. Yes, yes.

KURTZ: ... (UNINTELLIGIBLE) and which knew nothing about this.

FRANKEN: Right.

KURTZ: Asking him to tell his personal story about remaining abstinent before marriage.

FRANKEN: Right.

KURTZ: You said that you had many other accounts from people about abstinence.

FRANKEN: Right.

KURTZ: Here's the book, "Lying Liars." How could you engage in that kind of deception?

FRANKEN: This is called a prank. I'm not misleading my readers.

KURTZ: But you're misleading Ashcroft.

FRANKEN: Yes, but it would be like saying, you know who are the most dishonest people in the world? The producers of "Candid Camera." It's like what I did was -- this administration promotes abstinence- only sex education, which has been -- the mounting evidence shows that it's been -- that's not intended as a pun -- that shows that it does not work.

And that's why the NIH and the Centers for Disease Control and the American Medical Association and every mainstream and distinguished scientific and medical institution backs comprehensive sex ed.

KURTZ: I understand. You were trying to make a political point.

FRANKEN: So I...

(CROSSTALK)

FRANKEN: So I sent a letter to him and -- it's not dishonest. It's a joke.

KURTZ: But you said you were very embarrassed to have put Harvard in such a difficult position.

FRANKEN: Because I put it on their stationery, and I should not have done that. But -- and because I was a guest there. But the thing was I told him I was writing a book at Harvard called "Saving It" on abstinence-only education, and chapter four was "Role Modeling It."

KURTZ: Understood.

FRANKEN: And, yes, if you read the letter in the context of the book, there's no way not to interpret it as a joke.

KURTZ: OK, let me read one.

FRANKEN: So it's not like Ann Coulter, who lies to her readers.

KURTZ: Well, you've set me up for the next question...

FRANKEN: OK.

KURTZ: ... which is, in the book, you call conservatives as "liars" and "evil" and nut cases, in the case of Ann Coulter.

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: To some degree, aren't you descending to the kind of strident tone that people like Ann Coulter use, people who you are criticizing?

FRANKEN: Sometimes I use over-the-top language as a comedic (UNINTELLIGIBLE) over the top. On Ann Coulter nut case, I have to tell you that I talked to a lot of Republicans doing this book, and sometimes I'd like get in a fight with them. I mean, I'd be arguing with them on the phone, and I'd be explaining what the book is, and I'd say, "I'm doing a chapter on Ann Coulter." And they'd always stop and go, "Oh, off the record, there's something wrong with her."

So with her I can defend nut case easily.

KURTZ: OK. But sometimes you're trying to be funny with some of this overheated language?

FRANKEN: Yes. And I think that anybody who reads me -- in "Rush Limbaugh's a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations," I wrote a thing called -- I wrote a chapter called "Fair Mean and Unfair Mean." And I think I'm fair mean.

KURTZ: OK.

FRANKEN: I'm fighting back to these people who are bullies and who lie.

KURTZ: All right. Well, we'll let our viewers decide on that. You mentioned Limbaugh and Sean Hannity and O'Reilly, all very popular on talk radio, which is obviously...

FRANKEN: Well, O'Reilly is not so popular on talk radio.

KURTZ: Well, obviously conservative dominated. Why have liberals, Mario Cuomo, Jerry Brown, and others flopped on talk radio?

FRANKEN: Well, first of all, Mario Cuomo did a once a week show. So that's not a fair comparison to some of those three guys.

KURTZ: But clearly, liberals have not had a lot of success. And you're thinking of going into it yourself.

FRANKEN: Yes, absolutely. And one of the reasons I think, first of all, this is to give credit to the conservatives. They did it. They jumped on first.

KURTZ: They found an audience.

FRANKEN: Limbaugh found the audience and created this thing and saved AM radio. And I intensely dislike the man and what he does, but I'll give him credit for that. And so talk radio became this format, which was, you know, angry white men. And it's hard for a liberal to go on between Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh, because it's like doing country music after hip-hop. I mean, just the audience doesn't go from one to the other.

KURTZ: We're a little short on time. But nevertheless, you are considering...

(CROSSTALK)

FRANKEN: Yes, and that's why...

KURTZ: ... liberal radio show.

FRANKEN: And that's why we're looking at this and looking at it very seriously, of doing a network where people can reliably turn on to progressive talk. If you like NPR without the stories on Appalachian quilts, and maybe a little bit more funny.

KURTZ: It sounds like it might be funny.

FRANKEN: Yes.

KURTZ: And we'll look forward to listening to it if you get on.

Al Franken, thank you very much for joining us.

FRANKEN: Thank you, Howard.

KURTZ: Still to come, why has the press suddenly turned sour on Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry? Stay with us.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. JOHN KERRY (D-MA), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: With confidence in the courage of our people to change what is wrong and do what is right, I come here to say why I am a candidate for president of the United States of America.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KURTZ: John Kerry re-launching his presidential campaign this week. The press has suddenly pronounced him the ex-frontrunner, as Howard Dean rides a wave of favorable publicity. And the Massachusetts senator can't seem to buy a good headline.

Well, joining us now is Tucker Carlson, co-host of CNN's "CROSSFIRE." He has a new book out: "Politicians, Partisans and Parasites: My Adventures in Cable News." And William Saletan, chief political correspondent for Slate. His book, "Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War," has just been published.

You wrote a piece this week about Kerry. Can this candidate be saved? Isn't, shall we say, ridiculously early to be digging Kerry's grave?

WILLIAM SALETAN, CHIEF POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT, SLATE: Well, I don't think so, in the sense that Kerry hasn't shown anything. What Kerry has failed to do is to show any affirmative appeal, any connection with the electorate. That's what the press is waiting for.

We see that with Howard Dean; we love to cover Howard Dean. We're waiting for Kerry to show that. He hasn't.

KURTZ: Well, six weeks before the 2000 election you wrote a piece called "Why Bush is Toast." Could your latest piece become toast as well?

SALETAN: It sure could, but there would have to be a reason for it. And that's what I'm failing to see. I mean, we just had another debate this week and we were supposed to see John Kerry attacking Howard Dean, and it didn't happen. He's not giving us a story line. We can't cover him, we can't make him more of a player.

KURTZ: No story line for the press side, that is terrible, Tucker. How did the media magically decide that Kerry is struggling, sinking, tanking, you know, five months before anyone gets to vote?

TUCKER CARLSON, CO-HOST, "CROSSFIRE": Yes. I don't know how I wound up in the role as Kerry defender, but that's kind of how I feel. I think the press sees him as Al Gore, essentially. There was a huge amount of hostility, personal hostility from otherwise liberal political reporters directed at Al Gore.

KURTZ: And you're saying they just don't like John Kerry.

CARLSON: They just don't like him. I mean, "The Boston Globe," which has got to be the most liberal paper in the country, certainly the most annoying, has

actually I think been really tough on John Kerry. They did this piece implying he's hiding the fact he's Jewish, completely unfair piece. It's hard to imagine that they would do that to anyone else. I think people have a bias and the press have a bias against John Kerry. It's amazing to watch.

KURTZ: Your analysis in that piece, you didn't talk that much about his health care plan or his position on rolling back the Bush tax cuts. You said he doesn't seem angry enough compared to Howard Dean. You said you can't believe he fought in Vietnam. You said he spends too much time fixing his hair.

Don't voters care about substance?

SALETAN: No, you're right. And what we in the press need to do is to distinguish between one criticism of John Kerry, a superficial criticism that he's boring or that he's not exciting enough, and the more substantive criticism, which is that he tries to play everything both ways. That is a substantial criticism, and I think both of them, to some extent, are valid. And we need to separate those two things out as we cover the campaign.

KURTZ: But so much of this is poll-driven. Because Kerry has dropped in the polls and because Dean has suddenly raised more money through the Internet, everybody -- it's just classic pack journalism. Everybody wants to pile on Kerry. If Kerry was 10 points higher in the polls, people would be writing pieces about, you know, how he has a great shot at the nomination.

CARLSON: I don't know. I think it's deeper than that, though. You'll notice that John Edwards raised a great deal of money a couple of months back. There was a day -- it was a one-day story, basically.

And, in fact, the story with John Edwards was, yes, he raised the money, but he hasn't met anybody. He hasn't been on the ground. He was dismissed out of hand.

John Kerry is actually doing -- depending on what polls you look at -- nationally, in the CBS poll and the CNN poll he's doing pretty well, considering Lieberman is leading by far. Nobody even reports that. So I think people just don't like him.

KURTZ: You mentioned the debate in New Mexico Thursday night. Let's take a brief look at John Kerry in that debate.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KERRY: The swagger of a president who says, "Bring them on," does not bring our troops peace or safety. And I intend -- I will return -- I believe we need a president who understands how to get it right in the beginning.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KURTZ: Now you're saying John Kerry attacks George Bush, who cares. If John Kerry had attacked Howard Dean, the press would be all excited and then that would be the lead of every story. We were kind of waiting for that.

SALETAN: Well, there is a substantive criticism that we could hear more of from John Kerry of Howard Dean, and that is that Dean wants to repeal all of the Bush tax cuts, including the parts that went to the middle class. That would be an interesting debate for the press to cover.

Kerry has not focused on that. He mentioned it, didn't headline it. And in the post-debate coverage, it was Joe Lieberman who got the attention because he really directly and clearly went after Howard Dean. Now, Joe Lieberman doesn't have that much of a chance compared to Kerry, but he is hogging that position and driving Kerry out of it.

KURTZ: But you seem to be suggesting that it's Kerry's role or a candidate's role to sort of entertain the press and throw verbal punches so that we can write more colorful stories.

SALETAN: Well, he doesn't have to entertain or appeal to us, but he does need to appeal to the voters. And that matters. If a candidate can't connect with the voters, can't give them an affirmative reason to support him, as opposed to the other candidates, that's his problem. And I think we're justified in covering him accordingly.

KURTZ: It's five months before any American actually gets to vote in these primaries. Isn't that pretty early for this kind of, you know, definitive horse race journalism that who's got a chance and who doesn't have a chance?

CARLSON: It's not too early for the narratives to be written. Each candidate, as you know, is defined by a story line and narrative; sum them up in one sentence. And John Kerry is defined very early as a phony. And I do think that's the one sort of unforgivable thing in the eyes of the press, is to be a phony.

Just again, as Al Gore was defined as...

KURTZ: Whether it's exaggerated or...

CARLSON: That's exactly right. Someone is not true to himself is someone who, for instance, voted to authorize force in Iraq and then comes out later and says he was never for it.

KURTZ: He didn't say that. He said that he was trying to threaten the use of force and he expected Bush to...

CARLSON: That's exactly right, which I think -- but incidentally, I think will live forever in the annals of phony lines. That is in the "I did not inhale" category. "I voted to threaten the use of force." Nobody votes to threaten anything; you vote to authorize. I mean, it was ludicrous.

KURTZ: Is the press holding all the candidates to the same standard? I mean, every little thing that Kerry is perceived to be fudging on certainly gets scrutiny not just from "The Boston Globe," but from a lot of the media. Some of the other candidates we think, you know, they're second tier, and so we don't hold them to the same standards.

True or false?

SALETAN: Well, it's true. But once the other candidate -- if any of the other candidates gets to where John Kerry is, which is being in the position of the potential stop Dean candidate, they'll get the same treatment. Right now, Kerry is lucky to be getting that kind of scrutiny.

KURTZ: He's lucky?

SALETAN: Yes, yes.

KURTZ: Because it shows that we think he might still be able to win?

SALETAN: He's getting attention that the others -- is Joe Lieberman getting this kind of attention? I don't think so. I think that he...

KURTZ: That could be a mistake, though.

SALETAN: On Lieberman's part?

KURTZ: It could be a mistake on the press' part not to take candidates like Joe Lieberman more seriously just because of some of these early polls in Iowa and New Hampshire. That's my view.

Before I let you go, what do you, Tucker Carlson, an allegedly serious journalist, doing interviewing Britney Spears and asking her about her views on the war?

CARLSON: Well, see, I think you're getting back to the allegedly serious part. I'll interview anybody. I mean, the whole point of journalism is to do things you never thought you'd do, meet people you wouldn't be able to meet, ask questions that never occurred to you before. So I'm delighted to interview -- I look forward to interviewing more half-naked pop stars.

KURTZ: But you let her off the hook. She said, "Oh, I trust the president on the war." You didn't press her on Iraq.

CARLSON: I couldn't be mean. Howie, if you were there, trust me, you would not have been able to move in for the kill with Britney Spears. I thought she might cry. And I just couldn't do it.

KURTZ: Well, it would have been great TV.

CARLSON: I'm not tough enough.

KURTZ: Tucker Carlson, William Saletan, thanks very much for joining us.

When we come back, we'll go behind the headlines. We'll look at the media coverage of the 9/11 anniversary.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KURTZ: Time now for a look behind the headlines.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

KURTZ (voice-over): A year ago, it seemed to me the media went overboard in trumpeting the first anniversary of the awful events of September 11. Endless articles, endless interviews, endless television coverage of a day that we will always remember.

I was expecting a replay this year, but the media, which rarely agree on anything, seemed to have settled on a low-key approach. Cover the ceremonies at ground zero, then switch back to the usual fare, soap operas and the cable soap operas of Laci, Kobe and Britney. No 12 straight hours of coverage on ABC, no special sections in "The New York Times" and few new books on 9/11, because, according to "The Times," last year's crop didn't sell that well.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

KURTZ: I've got to admit, I'm relieved that the media aren't rubbing those raw wounds, or trumpeting this as a news event. We see reminders of 9/11 every day, every time we get on an airplane, pass through a metal detector, or look at the gaping hole in the Manhattan skyline. Most of us don't need the media's help in remembering the searing images of that dreadful day.

When we come back, our viewers weigh in on Arnold Schwarzenegger and the press.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KURTZ: Last week we talked about Arnold Schwarzenegger's 1977 interview with "Oui" magazine, in which he talked graphically about group sex and drugs. First, he explained that he had said wild and crazy things in his bodybuilder days. Then he said he didn't remember the interview. Then he said he has just been exaggerating to help the sport.

What about our viewers? Jim sent us an e-mail: "I don't think the media should publish the interview. People change, and he may have completely different ideas today. Personally, I don't give a damn about his sex life or his views about sex. What can he do to make California a better place to live?"

Well, that's it for this edition of RELIABLE SOURCES. I'm Howard Kurtz. Join us again next Sunday morning at 11:30 Eastern for another critical look at the media. "LATE EDITION WITH WOLF BLITZER" begins right after this check of the hour's top stories. TO ORDER A VIDEO OF THIS TRANSCRIPT, PLEASE CALL 800-CNN-NEWS OR USE OUR SECURE ONLINE ORDER FORM LOCATED AT www.fdch.com