

Al Franken: The Rakish Interview

Can Minnesota's Favorite Super-liberal Save America?

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Fresh from the flap over his new book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, our favorite local boy Franken (he's from St. Louis Park, you know) has never been better—even when he won five Emmys for his work on the original cast and writing staff of *Saturday Night Live*, or when he won a Grammy for best comedy album in the 1980s, or when he starred as ersatz new-age twelve-stepper Stuart Smalley in the nineties. Perhaps he reestablished himself as a household name by cleverly arranging to be sued by Fox TV, who objected to the subtitle of his book (“A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right”). Fox wisely dropped their suit last month, recognizing that they'd done nothing other than make themselves look ridiculous and guarantee Franken's place at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. They crowed that Franken could now “return to the obscurity that he is normally accustomed to.” Which only confirmed just how clueless they are. As one wag wrote in a media insider's prayer, “Dear Lord, please let me some day achieve the level of obscurity currently enjoyed by Al Franken.” Indeed, for three decades, Franken has never been far from primetime TV or the bestseller list. For his latest act, he has taken on the role of a prophet in the wilderness. At a time when the political left is demoralized and exhausted and just about humorless, Franken has become a one-man crusade defending the good name, high ideals, and biting humor of old-fashioned bleeding-heart liberalism. *Lies* is a delightful deflation of the monopoly conservative pundits have established in broadcast “journalism” in recent years. It also hits close to home, with a deft analysis of what exactly went wrong in the days and weeks after Paul Wellstone died, one year ago.—Editors

The Rake: For Minnesotans, your chapter on how the right-wing punditocracy spun the Wellstone memorial was chilling.

Al Franken: Well, that's what the chapter is really about. The Republicans' idea was to take this memorial and use it for political purposes. That by sorting through what was there on the videotape and taking a couple moments that were inappropriate and showing them over and over again, they lied about what the rest of the memorial was about.

You were at the memorial. What did you think?

At a wake you tell funny stories about people, and laugh and celebrate their life. There was a lot of that, and there was also a lot of weeping and sobbing, and cheering. And it was interesting to see that someone like Joe Klein in the *New*

Yorker wrote a piece about it, and his was a more straight-ahead understanding of what happened, what it was. And it was a reflection of Paul. Paul was an advocate for the dispossessed and the poor, and that's what this thing was about. It looked like a campaign thing, but it was just really, "Carry forward what Paul believed in." The only actual campaigning—"We're gonna win," that kind of thing—came from Rick Kahn and from Mark Wellstone. And Mark Wellstone lost his dad. Lost his mom, and lost his sister.

What was disgusting was that the Republicans kept saying this had been planned to fool everyone. "It was advertised as a memorial but it was just a political rally." And that they had planned it. Limbaugh was doing a whole thing like this had been planned. Like it wasn't what it was—which was an event that the kids had a huge part in planning, an event that the speakers who spoke eloquently about all the people who were lost in the crash, the closest people to Paul, his surviving sons—who had just gone through this trauma—had basically organized, approved of everything, and it was a spontaneous thing. Twenty thousand people came to this thing because they wanted to express their grief, and their joy about his life, and celebrate their lives, and that's what it was. And people like Limbaugh literally said that people had been bused in. That the audience had been planted. He literally said this. "This was a planted crowd." And what happens is, there is a right-wing media, Fox and Rush Limbaugh, the Washington Times and the New York Post, and they report this horrible outrage. And especially talk radio.

They get people to complain, and that becomes the story, the complaining. And you know, you have someone in Minnesota, Sarah Janecek, who added to the distortion, saying that it was all scripted, and that the proof was that it was on the Jumbotron, what everyone was saying, and that the people were even cued to laugh and applaud. And of course she was referring to the simulcast. She either didn't understand what a simulcast was, or she didn't understand what closed-captioning was, which I think is hard to believe, or she was presenting it as something that it wasn't. Which is sort of in keeping with all the kinds of distortions I heard in the aftermath of the memorial. There's something very unspiritual about that kind of taking a tragedy and exploiting it. And that's what they accused the Democrats of doing, but the only way they could accuse the Democrats of doing that was by distorting what happened.

Let me say something positive. There are definitely people of good conscience on both sides who do try to talk to each other. I have a number of friends who are on what I consider the religious right. One of my best friends might say he's a Christian conservative or a cultural conservative. He and I probably disagree on almost every social issue. But we're friends. And I've been trying, with not a great deal of success, to get him together with people, for example, from the gay and lesbian community, to get him just to see them more as human beings. And I think he would say that gays and lesbians should have basic rights—not be discriminated against in employment and things like that. But you know, he won't

go that far on things like adoption, and that kind of thing, and that's because of his deeply felt religious views. I disagree with him. But we can have a civil conversation. And I think he's a sincere and serious person.

I think that there are sincere and serious people on all sides. Like Paul Wellstone went together with Senator Pete Domenici on certain things. There are people on both sides of the political spectrum who can get together and seriously come to a consensus on things and not do the kind of things that Limbaugh does. Maybe a new paradigm emerges?

Hopefully. What happens is, it's almost like the Arab-Israeli conflict. Where there are such long-standing crimes each has committed against the other—at least that's the perception each side has—that there's no trust.

So, when Norm Coleman says in his debate with Walter Mondale that "I want to change the tone," after he called Paul Wellstone "a joke," after they ran ads against Paul that were dishonest...

The Republican Senate Committee ran an ad against Paul in which they said, "Paul Wellstone voted to spend millions for saving the seaweed in Maui." He did do that. But so did 89 percent of Republicans in the Senate, and so did Republican Majority Leader Bill Frist. So when you're doing stuff like that, and then you say, "I want to change the tone," it's very hard to turn the other cheek and go, like, "Oh, well, OK, you can hit us, you can say dishonest things about us, you can play that way, but we're not supposed to?" You know what I mean? So then somebody draws a cartoon of a Republican throwing an old person off a cliff. And it's all Sean Hannity can talk about for the next year.

You don't think much of Senator Norm Coleman.

I thought the comment he made that he was a 99 percent improvement over Wellstone—about six months after Paul's death—I thought that said everything you need to know about the guy.

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Are you still involved with the Wellstone family at all?

Do you know about Wellstone Action? Wellstone Action is basically training people to be activists in the same way that Paul was.

Who do you like as the Democratic candidate for president?

Well, I'd like Clinton to be president.

Which one?

Either. But, of the candidates that we have now, I think we have a lot of strong candidates. I could see John Kerry as president, I could see Howard Dean, I could see Richard Gephardt, John Edwards. I could see Graham and I could see Lieberman.

Here's an easy question: Who don't you want for president?

George W. Bush. And Al Sharpton.

What issues do you think the Democrats need to focus on to be a contender in future elections?

Bill Clinton said that in a fight of the small, the meaner one wins. I think the Democrats have to get a little bigger, and I think we have to show that we're for national security, sure, but also for economic justice, expanding the economy, protecting the environment, improving education and health care, all those things...a way to make sure that the people who lose in globalization don't fall through the cracks.

Those were the same issues, though, that the Democrats campaigned on in the last election.

Well, I don't think those are issues that they actually campaigned on effectively at all, especially nationally. I mean, they got caught, you know? Also, I think we have to be more aggressive in getting our message out and more aggressive in combating the right-wing part of the media. That is a very organized and pernicious group.

What would a third party, say, the Greens, have to do to become viable competitors in future elections?

I have very mixed feelings about that. Actually, I'm a Democrat and I think that people in the Green party should become active in the Democratic party and try to make sure their concerns are handled within the party.

Would you ever join a third party?

No. Unless the Democratic party just went haywire somewhere, but no. As a kid in St. Louis Park, when you thought about what you wanted to be when you grew up—did you ever think that you'd be taking on people as big as a sitting president, the entire Republican Party, Ann Coulter?

I don't think that Ann Coulter's very big. I think she's a very small person.

Was there any foreshadowing back then for the life you have now?

Oh, yeah. I mean, it depends how old you're talking about, but I've been doing comedy since I was in second grade and anybody I know who's become a comedian has been doing it from a very young age.

How did it all turn political for you?

I guess it all turned political for me in high school, when we were going through Vietnam. Nixon and Vietnam sort of did it for me.

How is it that you've become an army of one, crusading with humor against the overwhelming tide of conservative bloviators and prevaricators—when most of us lefties are just plain exhausted and demoralized?

Well, I think there is some exhaustion and some demoralization that I wanted to address in the book. And in the book, I wanted to energize people and get them to rally around the idea that we can win this one, we can change the country.

So things aren't as bleak for Democrats as they might seem?

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Not that bleak. We showed last time that when we have a Democratic president, we can improve this country in many ways. You know, Clinton obviously wasn't perfect and he made some mistakes. But this president took a moment of tremendous opportunity after September 11th, a moment of national unity that was unprecedented, and instead of moving us in a direction of mutual sacrifice and purpose, he used it to try to further his own political ends. He continued giving tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans at the expense of those at the bottom—exactly what he said he wouldn't do.

Do you consider yourself a wealthy American?

Oh, I am. Yeah. I'm not as wealthy as some, though!

How did Ann Coulter react to your book?

I haven't heard anything from her. She's laying low. She's been laying low since Joe Conason's book, *Big Lies*, was published. It came out a couple weeks before mine. He's very critical of her and she was supposed to debate him on MSNBC or be a guest on a show and she chickened out.

Have people been asking you if you're going to run for office?

People ask me that all the time. Gore Vidal said people always wanted him to be a candidate for office, and he said he wouldn't because he couldn't be both a novelist and a politician; one is supposed to tell the truth as he sees it, and the other one has to make sure not to give away the show. Is that why you don't run?

Not really. It's just that I don't know if I'd be very good at being a public official.

What are your plans? Will you be on TV, "punditing" about the upcoming elections?

I think I may be on radio.

There's talk about a new liberal talk-radio station or syndicate being launched by AnShell Media, and that you'll be involved. Will we know for sure in the next year?

Yes, definitely. Probably in the next couple of months.

Who else might be involved?

There are a lot of names they've been throwing around. Possibly Joe Lockhart—President Clinton's former press secretary.

In your book you had help from "TeamFranken," a group of Harvard students you worked with at the Kennedy School. Will you all be hanging out together for the upcoming election and helping out the Democrats?

People have dispersed a little bit because some graduated either from the Kennedy School or the college and there's some in Washington now. TeamFranken, as an entity, is still talking on the Internet. I mean, we're emailing

each other, but this was a one-time project. But I think there will be members of TeamFranken who will be working with me on the radio show.

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I understand Stuart Smalley is joining us now. Stuart, you're a spiritual guy—in a twelve-step program—what did you think when you read Lies and saw that it was actually God that commissioned AI to write the book?

Stuart Smalley: Well, I think AI accessed his Higher Power by meditating, and I think that's a great thing. I think that's what, you know, meditation is for. It's one of the most successful meditations I've ever heard of.

Any reaction from God on the success of the book?

No, He hasn't talked to me about it.

According to the book, everybody seems to think there's something wrong with Ann Coulter—even God! Do you have any twelve-step wisdom to offer her at what must be a difficult time?

Well, I have just seen her a couple times on TV and I've read AI's book. I don't know what it is—if she's a rage-aholic. I don't know why she's the way she is. You know, I don't want to take her inventory.

Do you have any affirmations that you could give to George W. Bush?

Well, let me see. For W, it would be, "Hello, me. I am fun to be with. The majority of the people didn't vote for me, but that's OK. Because I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, I overcame my drinking problem." I think that would be a good one for him.