

# WE LOST TWO GREAT MEDIA VOICES

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Last December, I told staff members that I don't think Larry King or Rush Limbaugh will be with us much longer. From what I had been reading, their days were numbered. Regrettably, my concerns were validated. Larry died in January and Rush passed away the next month.

I dealt with both of these men for many years, and regard them as media titans.

They had a few things in common: Larry was the greatest TV interviewer of all time and Rush was the greatest radio commentator of all time. They also had a few things in common in their personal lives: Larry had seven wives; Rush had four. But Larry was liberal, and Rush was conservative. Neither was Catholic, however that didn't matter to me: what mattered was their kindness and support.

When I was interviewed for this job in April 1993, I was in competition with three other persons, all of whom had better experience in running organizations than I had. But I was a professor, an author and a TV personality. The search committee saw tapes of my TV interviews and were impressed. Among the interviews they previewed were some that Larry hosted. So in an indirect way, Larry was instrumental in getting me this job.

Why was Larry the best interviewer of all time? Because he did something that almost no one does today on TV: he listened. His show was never about him—it was about his guests. He actually held a conversation and allowed his guests to talk. His next line of questions were based on something his guests just said; they were not based on questions prepared by his

producer. That's why he was never seen reading from index cards.

When the show was over, I occasionally spent time with Larry, usually talking about the subjects we had just discussed. While we were of two different minds, he was never acerbic or condescending, the way too many in this business are today. He was a gentleman who appreciated honesty and an informed opinion.

While Rush played no role in helping me land this job, once I took over, he got the word out about the Catholic League; he reached an audience I could never reach. On many occasions throughout the years, someone would call our office saying Rush just gave us a rousing endorsement. Unfortunately, I was almost always working when he was on the air and did not have a chance to hear him. But I sure appreciated his support.

I knew there was something special about Rush before he made it really big. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, while driving from Pittsburgh, where I lived, back home to New York City, where my mom and sister lived, I listened to Bob Grant on WABC radio. He was the kingpin of radio at the time. Following him was Rush. I said to family and friends, "Watch this guy—he is going to be bigger than Grant."

Rush and I never met, though when he interviewed me at length in 2014, it felt as though we had. He featured the interview in the April edition of The Limbaugh Letter. He was easy going and was quite humble.

"I wanted to talk to you for the longest time," he said, "and I'm really appreciative that you've been able to make this time here. You intrigue me. I've been watching you for years on TV. I don't think there's an advocate who does it better, and does it in a way that's not overtly devout or religious." I was blown away by what he said.

Larry and Rush were refreshingly unscripted. Of course, they

came mentally prepared and knew exactly what they wanted to convey. But unlike so many members of the chattering class today, they didn't repeat themselves endlessly, and they never lost their spontaneity.

The rap on Larry was that he threw softball questions. It would be more accurate to say that he never felt it necessary to insult his guests. This explains why he could secure some blue chip guests who were known to turn down TV interviews. That's why his competitors were jealous.

The rap on Rush was that he was too judgmental. Typically, those who made this accusation had no problem listening to the most judgmental commentators in the world, provided they were on the same side. In other words, they objected to his conservative listeners. What really drove them mad—and this was part of his genius—was his ability to reach an enormous audience of men and women who did not necessarily think of themselves as conservative, but realized they were after listening to him.

If I had to name one quality that Larry and Rush had in common that explains their greatness it would be their education: they were both high school graduates (Larry never attended college and Rush dropped out after two semesters).

To be sure, college has its merits, but it can also stifle creativity. No institution breeds more cognitive conformity than higher education, and this is especially true of the humanities and social sciences. Fortunately, Larry and Rush were never held hostage.