

Rush Limbaugh Dies at 70; Turned Talk Radio Into a Right-Wing Attack Machine

With a following of 15 million and a divisive style of mockery, grievance and denigrating language, he was a force in reshaping American conservatism.

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Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing radio megastar whose slashing, divisive style of mockery and grievance reshaped American conservatism, denigrating Democrats, environmentalists, “feminazis” (his term) and other liberals while presaging the rise of Donald J. Trump, died on Wednesday at his home in Palm Beach, Fla. He was 70.

His wife, Kathryn, announced the death at the start of Mr. Limbaugh's radio show, a decades-long destination for his flock of more than 15 million listeners. “I know that I am most certainly not the Limbaugh that you tuned in to listen to today,” she said, before telling the audience that he had died that morning from complications of lung cancer.

Mr. Limbaugh revealed a diagnosis of advanced lung cancer last February. A day later, Mr. Trump awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, during the State of the Union address.

Since his emergence in the 1980s as one of the first broadcasters to take charge of a national political call-in show, Mr. Limbaugh transformed the once-sleepy sphere of talk radio into a relentless right-wing attack machine, his voice a regular feature of daily life — from homes to workplaces and the commute in between — for millions of devoted listeners.

He became a singular figure in the American media, fomenting mistrust, grievances and even hatred on the right for Americans who did not share their views, and he pushed baseless claims and toxic rumors long before Twitter and Reddit became havens for such disinformation. In politics, he was not only an ally of Mr. Trump but also a precursor, combining media fame, right-wing scare tactics and over-the-top showmanship to build an enormous fan base and mount attacks on truth and facts.

His conspiracy theories ranged from baldfaced lies about Barack Obama's birthplace — the president “has yet to have to prove that he's a citizen,” he said falsely in 2009 — to claims that Mr. Obama's 2009 health care bill would empower “death panels” and “euthanize” elderly Americans. In the wake of last year's election, he amplified Mr. Trump's groundless claims of voter fraud; on President Biden's Inauguration Day, during one of his final broadcasts, he insisted to listeners that the new administration had “not legitimately won it.”

In 1995, in the days after the Oklahoma City bombing, President Bill Clinton denounced the “promoters of paranoia” on talk radio — remarks that were widely seen as aimed at Mr. Limbaugh.



President Donald J. Trump awarded Mr. Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom during his State of the Union address in the House Chamber of the Capitol. Doug Mills/The New York Times

“We hear so many loud and angry voices in America today whose sole goal seems to be to try to keep some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other,” Mr. Clinton said.

Mr. Limbaugh's immense popularity had a profound effect on the country's media landscape. Dozens of right-wing talkers cropped up on local radio stations emulating his divisive commentary. “There is no talk radio as we know it without Rush Limbaugh; it just doesn't exist,” Sean Hannity, the conservative Fox News and talk-radio star, said in a tribute to Mr. Limbaugh on Wednesday. “I'd even make the argument, in many ways there's no Fox News or even some of these other opinionated cable networks.”

In the Limbaugh lexicon, advocates for the homeless were “compassion fascists,” women who defended abortion rights were “feminazis,” environmentalists were “tree-hugging wackos.” He called global warming a hoax and cruelly ridiculed Michael J. Fox, imitating the tremors that were a symptom of the actor's Parkinson's disease.

When hundreds of thousands of Americans were dying of AIDS, Mr. Limbaugh ran a regular segment called "AIDS updates," in which he mocked the deaths of gay men by playing Dionne Warwick's recording of the song "I'll Never Love This Way Again." He later expressed regret for the segment, but he continued to make homophobic remarks over the years; in 2020, he dismissed the presidential bid of Pete Buttigieg by claiming that Americans would be repelled by a "gay guy kissing his husband onstage."

In 2012, Mr. Limbaugh lambasted Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student, as a "slut" and a "prostitute" after she had testified at a congressional hearing in support of the Obama administration's requirement that health insurance plans cover contraceptives for women.

"If we're going to pay for your contraceptives and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it; we want you to post the videos online so we can all watch," Mr. Limbaugh said. After he was denounced by President Obama and congressional leaders and companies pulled advertising from his show, Mr. Limbaugh issued a rare mea culpa, relying on one of his more common excuses: that his comments had been meant in good fun.

"My choice of words was not the best," he said, "and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir. I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices."

Living in Luxury

Mr. Limbaugh presented himself as a tribune of blue-collar America even as his program made him fabulously rich. He collected \$85 million a year and lived in a 24,000-square-foot oceanfront mansion in Palm Beach. (He sold his Manhattan apartment, on Fifth Avenue, in 2010.)

Still, despite his enormous following in grass-roots Republican politics, he was often viewed as a sideshow of sorts by establishment conservatives. That ended in 2015 with the meteoric rise of Mr. Trump, a Limbaugh devotee who aped the radio host's bombastic and demagoguing style on the campaign trail and quickly took command of the crowded Republican field for president.



President George H. W. Bush with Rush Limbaugh in 1992. James Estrin/The New York Times

After Mr. Trump's shock victory, Mr. Limbaugh sounded giddy on the air about his new ally in the White House. He hailed the president's efforts to curtail Muslim immigration, cut taxes, promote American jobs, repeal Obamacare, raise military spending and dismantle environmental protections. As for opposition to the Trump agenda and allegations of Russian interference in the American elections in 2016, Mr. Limbaugh had a ready explanation.

"This attack is coming from the shadows of the deep state, where former Obama employees remain in the intelligence community," he said. "They are lying about things, hoping to make it easier for them and the Obama shadow government to eventually get rid of Trump."

Last year, as the Covid-19 pandemic swept the nation, Mr. Limbaugh pushed dangerous lies, at one point likening the coronavirus to the common cold. And in October, as Election Day neared and Mr. Trump recuperated from the virus himself, the president joined Mr. Limbaugh on the air for a two-hour "virtual rally," largely devoted to his grievances.

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"We love you," Mr. Limbaugh assured Mr. Trump on behalf of his listeners.

Last month, Mr. Limbaugh tried to minimize Mr. Trump's influence on his supporters who had attacked the United States Capitol, saying that Democrats "are lying about his role in the Jan. 6 uprising, or whatever you want to call it." Before the siege, he had touted debunked conspiracy theories about election fraud, telling listeners in December that Mr. Biden "didn't win this thing fair and square" and toying with the idea that the nation was "trending toward secession."



Rush Limbaugh in 1993 at the 21 Club in Manhattan. Fabulously wealthy, he was known to drop \$5,000 tips to waiters in restaurants. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Mr. Trump repaid Mr. Limbaugh's fealty in an impromptu call on Wednesday to Fox News, praising him as "a great gentleman" who had "really got it." The former president was one of a parade of Republican luminaries who issued tributes, a sign that Mr. Limbaugh's incendiary history had done little to dim his appeal with conservatives. Former President George W. Bush weighed in, too, calling Mr. Limbaugh "a friend" who "spoke his mind as a voice for millions of Americans."

Unlike Howard Stern, Don Imus and other big names in shock radio, Mr. Limbaugh had no on-the-air sidekicks, though he had conversations with the unheard voice of someone he called "Bo Snerdly." Nor did he have writers, scripts or outlines, just notes and clippings from newspapers he perused daily.

Alone with his multitudes in his studio, he joked, ranted, twitted and burst into song, mimicry or boo-hoos as "The Rush Limbaugh Show" beamed out over 650 stations of the Premiere Radio Networks, a subsidiary of iHeartMedia (formerly Clear Channel Communications). In his alternate-universe-on-the-air, he was "El Rushbo" and "America's Anchorman" in the "Southern Command" bunker of an "Excellence in Broadcasting" network.

To faithful "Dittoheads," his defiantly self-mocking followers, he was an indomitable patriot, an icon of wit and wisdom. His political clout, they said, lay in the reactions he provoked — avalanches of calls, emails and website rage, headlines aplenty and the occasional praise or wrath from the White House and Capitol Hill.

To detractors he was a sanctimonious charlatan, the most dangerous man in America, a label he co-opted. And some critics insisted that he had no real political power, only an intimidating, self-aggrandizing presence that swayed an aging, ultraright fringe whose numbers, while impressive, were not considered great enough to affect the outcome of national elections.

Married four times and divorced three times with no children, Mr. Limbaugh lived in his Palm Beach estate surrounded by Oriental carpets, chandeliers and a two-story mahogany-paneled library with leather-bound collections. He had a half-dozen cars, one costing \$450,000, and a \$54 million Gulfstream G550 jet. He was known to drop \$5,000 tips in restaurants.

Mr. Limbaugh was himself easily caricatured: overweight all his life, sometimes topping 300 pounds, a cigar smoker with an impish grin and sly eyes. He moved with surprising grace when showing how an environmentalist skips daintily in a woodland. But his voice was his brass ring — a jaunty, rapid staccato, breaking into squeaky dolphin-talk or falsetto sobbing to expose the do-gooders with his inventive, bruising vocabulary.

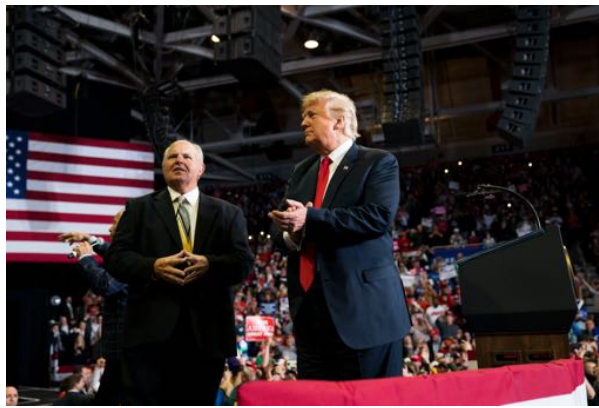
Painkillers and Hearing Loss

Mr. Limbaugh's air war, with his own rules of engagement, began with a talk show in Sacramento in 1984 and became nationally syndicated in 1988. For more than 20 years it was the most popular show of its kind on radio, helping to revive an anemic national AM band and becoming the centerpiece of an enterprise that branched into television, best-selling books, lucrative speaking tours and voluminous internet traffic.

But as the millennium turned, Mr. Limbaugh faced problems that threatened his empire. In 2001 he acknowledged that he had become almost deaf — resulting, he said, from an autoimmune disease. He continued his show, using powerful hearing aids, but they were not enough. He eventually resolved his problem with cochlear implants, which provided an electronic sense of sound. And he learned to read lips.

After years of addiction to painkillers, he was charged in Florida in 2006 with "doctor shopping" for prescriptions. He pleaded not guilty but paid the costs of a state investigation and entered rehabilitative therapy. He checked into an Arizona rehab center catering to celebrities and returned to the air after six weeks, telling listeners candidly of his addiction, treatment and legal status.

By 2008 Mr. Limbaugh was back on top for the national elections. He mounted Operation Chaos, urging his followers to vote for Hillary Rodham Clinton in the primaries to prolong Democratic infighting, and in the belief that Senator John McCain could more easily defeat Mr. Obama in the general election. He was wrong about that, but claimed credit for disrupting the Democrats.



Mr. Trump with Mr. Limbaugh at a political rally in Cape Girardeau, Mo., in 2018. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Rush Hudson Limbaugh III was born on Jan. 12, 1951, in Cape Girardeau, Mo., the older of two sons of Rush Jr. and Mildred (Armstrong) Limbaugh. His father was a World War II fighter pilot, a lawyer and Republican activist. His grandfather was a goodwill ambassador to India under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. An uncle and a cousin became federal judges.

As a boy Rush was a pudgy loner who disliked school and longed in vain for popularity. He liked radio and made up play-by-play baseball broadcasts. During the rebellious 1960s, he never dated. At 16, he took a summer course in radio engineering and, with a broadcaster's license, got an after-school disc jockey job at a local radio station.

After graduating from Cape Central High School in 1969, he enrolled at his parents' insistence at Southeast Missouri State University but flunked most of his courses, including speech and dance, and dropped out after two semesters.

In 1971, he became a disc jockey for WIXZ-AM in McKeesport, Pa., and in 1973 for KQV in Pittsburgh, using the name Jeff Christie. Over several years he worked at music stations before settling in Kansas City, Mo., where in 1979 he became director of promotions for the Kansas City Royals baseball team.

His first marriage, in 1977 to Roxy Maxine McNeely, a secretary at a Kansas City radio station, ended in divorce in 1980. He married Michelle Sixta, a Kansas City Royals usher, in 1983; they divorced in 1990. His 1994 marriage to Marta Fitzgerald, an aerobics instructor, also ended in divorce, in 2004. He married Kathryn Rogers, a party planner, in 2010.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Limbaugh is survived by his younger brother, David, a lawyer and writer.

Mr. Limbaugh tried radio again in 1984. His irreverence irked his Kansas City employers but drew the attention of KFBK in Sacramento, where Morton Downey Jr. had just been fired for making an ethnic slur. Mr. Limbaugh replaced him and was soon developing his ad-lib style — but one constrained by the Federal Communications Commission's fairness doctrine.

The doctrine, which required stations to provide free airtime for responses to controversial opinions they broadcast, was repealed in 1987, and Mr. Limbaugh proclaimed himself liberated. He moved to New York City in 1988 and, in partnership with Edward F. McLaughlin, a former president of the ABC radio network, began his nationally syndicated show on ABC's radio stations.

From 1992 to 1996, Mr. Limbaugh hosted a half-hour nightly television program, modeled on his radio show and syndicated on hundreds of stations.

Uneasy in New York political and broadcasting circles, subject to city and state tax audits, he moved to Palm Beach in 1997 but kept his Manhattan apartment until selling it for \$11 million in 2010. His friends included William F. Buckley Jr., publisher of *National Review*, as well as the political operative Karl Rove and Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Mr. Limbaugh raised millions for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society with annual telethons and led fund-raising drives for the Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation, which provides scholarships for children of Marines and law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

He wrote "The Way Things Ought to Be" (1992, with John Fund), "See, I Told You So" (1993, with Joseph Farah) and five children's books featuring a colonial era character, Rush Revere.

Mr. Limbaugh was profiled in articles and books, including Paul D. Colford's "The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God, an Unauthorized Biography" (1993), and "Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One" (2010), by Zev Chafets. He was a five-time winner of the National Association of Broadcasters' Marconi Radio Award and was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1993.

And fame was something he gloried in, even if acknowledging it in over-the-top style.

"Greetings, conversationalists across the fruited plain," he began in one of his stream-of-consciousness perorations from the bunker, an American flag dangling in the corner.

"This is Rush Limbaugh, the most dangerous man in America, with the largest hypothalamus in North America, serving humanity simply by opening my mouth, destined for my own wing in the Museum of American Broadcasting, executing everything I do flawlessly with zero mistakes, doing this show with half my brain tied behind my back just to make it fair, because I have talent on loan from God."

Tiffany Hsu and Alex Traub contributed reporting.