

RELEASE IN PART B6

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From: Lanny Davis
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November 10, 2010

Defending Olbermann and Hannity
 By Lanny J. Davis

<http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/media/128545-defending-olbermann-and-hannity>
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Is it possible to defend Keith Olbermann and Sean Hannity at the same time?

Yes — if they agree on a common principle. And in this case, though they both may deny it, they should agree on this principle: Both of them, as openly partisan hosts (Olbermann a liberal Democrat and Hannity a conservative Republican) should have the right to make donations to candidates or causes they believe in.

In fact, Fox has no problem with Hannity making political contributions because management makes no pretense that Fox's evening shows are objective news-reporting programs that should be held to journalistic rules of political neutrality. Fox makes a distinction between its news organization — including such widely respected national political reporters as Carl Cameron, Jim Angel and Wendell Golar — and its political evening shows.

For some reason, NBC and its affiliate MSNBC don't make this distinction. NBC apparently has a "rule" that both traditional news reporters and anchors, including NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams and "Meet the Press" anchor David Gregory, as well as its evening political talk shows hosts — Olbermann, Chris Matthews, Ed Schultz, Rachel Maddow and Lawrence O'Connell — be subject to the same rule: no political donations unless they are given advance permission.

With all respect, I think NBC has needlessly created a problem by trying to have it both ways — creating clearly partisan evening political shows to capture the "left" slice of the cable-watching public (and they have done that successfully, with their ratings moving up at least past CNN, though way below Fox) while still trying to present their evening hosts as "journalists," and thus held to traditional standards of journalistic neutrality.

This is what made Rachel Maddow's sanctimonious speech the night of Olbermann's firing especially hypocritical. First she seemed to agree that her sponsor and cheerleader, Olbermann, deserved to be suspended because he violated the "rule." But then she actually used the suspension of Olbermann as proof that the MSNBC evening shows, including her own, were true news programs — as contrasted to the "political" Fox hosts. She thought she was proving her point by scrolling all of Hannity's political donations.

Duh? Hannity proudly boasts of those contributions — because he doesn't pretend to play the part of an objective journalist or neutral interviewer. Is it possible Maddow thinks anyone will regard her as a legitimate news reporter when she consistently personally attacks those with whom she disagrees — whether former Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), any Blue Dog Democrat, Democratic Arkansas Sen. Blanche Lincoln and many, many others?

Regarding the subject of personal attacks, I have to make full disclosure here:

Keith Olbermann and I were once quite friendly, during the 1999-2000 time period when I appeared frequently on his show in defense of President Clinton during the impeachment nightmare. I still admire his liberal principles and his intelligence.

Then one night on "The O'Reilly Factor," I obliquely criticized MSNBC as well as Olbermann and Maddow for what I described as unfair attacks on Hillary Clinton during her presidential campaign. I was thinking in particular of Olbermann's awful and, in my opinion, reckless impugning of Hillary Clinton's motives when, during the last days of her campaign for the Democratic nomination, she made a brief reference to the assassination of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

A few nights later, I believe, Olbermann announced that I was on his nightly list of "worst persons in the world." I was playing chess with my then-11 year-old son, Josh, with Olbermann on in the background. We were both startled to hear Olbermann list me as the "second" worst person in the world for that night. My son was distressed enough when he heard that; even more so when he saw the photo Olbermann chose of me, with my face scowled and distorted.

I consoled him. "Don't worry, Josh — at least he didn't rank me No. 1!"

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Lanny Davis is the principal in the legal crisis management firm of Lanny J. Davis & Associates and a partner in the strategic communications firm of Davis-Block LLC. He served as President Clinton's Special Counsel in 1996-98 and as a member of President Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board 2006-07. He is the author of "Scandal: How 'Gotcha' Politics Is Destroying America" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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