

## The Ascension of Rachel Maddow

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8/28/08

The ascension of Rachel Maddow to the highest rungs of the media elite has been greeted with near pandemonium on the left in some respects reminiscent to that which greeted Obama's ascension as the Democratic nominee. The reaction is understandable: Both are whip-smart, rising from humble circumstances to become the deserving beneficiaries of elite post graduate educations (Harvard Law and Cambridge-Rhodes Scholarship respectively). And both are, at least in their public personae and, one senses in real life, enormously personable and sympathetic individuals. Au courant with a range of pop culture ephemera, at home shooting hoops, drinking scotch in seedy bars, or trawling for bass, it would seem that the most cynical hard core ideologue would jump at the chance to sit down with either for a beer or in front of a Red Sox or Bulls game on the tube. The two are what would have been called, in the benighted climate of a generation ago, minorities with respect to race and sexual preference and a great deal of their magnetism resides in their personifying the reality that we have moved beyond the defensive posturing of identity politics. Each is eminently comfortable in their own skins and it is this which allows them to function as consummate insiders while their finely attuned perceptions and capacity for empathy, most conspicuously displayed in Obama's brilliant memoir *Dreams of My Father*, derive from the critical distance which their outsider status confers on them.

When the comparisons between the two are taken further they begin to tilt in Maddow's favor. Obama's shabby and unprincipled embrace of post-partisanism whether in the form of the FISA compromise, siding with the most reactionary wing of the Supreme Court, his sabre rattling in the Middle East, has already begun to alienate more than a few of his erstwhile supporters. Maddow, in contrast, will have none of this: she recognizes that giving any quarter to the right inevitably confers fatal respectability on what Tom Frank calls the wrecking crew which has owned and operated the political system for the past generation.

Unlike Obama, Maddow is ready, willing and able to call a right wing turd a turd and she can be counted on to thoroughly masticate and dispatch into oblivion the Republican talking point du jour a protean talent for which she routinely displays on her radio show. Often this is done Jon Stewart style, with the aid of looped soundbites of a particularly absurd or vulgar ejaculation emanating from Larry Craig ("Let me be clear: I am not gay."), John McCain ("Bomb, bomb, Iran."), Bush ("The math doesn't work.") or Reagan ("Government is the problem.") All these serve as pinatas which Maddow hangs up and bashes with a gleeful and infectious enthusiasm which recalls, at least to those in my age group, the "revolution for the hell of it" ethos of new left icons like Abbie Hoffman and Bobby Seale.

It would be comforting to imagine that Maddow's oratorical brilliance, infectious albeit somewhat manic enthusiasm combined with an impressive command of policy minutiae

renders her problematic to the bosses considering her hiring at MSNBC in the same way as was the new left: compelling, cute, photogenic and, consequently, too salable a commodity to pass over while presenting a dangerous potential to use her media perch to inflict damage on the bottom line on MSNBC's parent company GE and to some degree on the ideological foundations of the corporate system. The excitement at the prospect of Maddow on primetime is predicated on this conspiratorial assessment of Maddow as an MSM mole for our side. But of course, that only tells one side of the story. A hint to what is omitted is provided in a [recent Nation magazine](#) piece where Maddow is described as a "deft, bright careeris(t)." What this means is that Maddow has provided more than a few hints that she is well aware of the limits of the system in which she is operating and is careful not to transgress them even while throwing red meat to her leftist base.

Indeed, when one examines much of the actual substance of TRMS (as the Maddow show is known to insiders) Maddow's new found status as a repository for leftwing hopes and rightwing fears seems a bit baffling. For stripping away Maddow's well honed partisan attacks, the show's essential format and function is little different from most other conventional gabfests featuring the passel of establishment think tank wonks and area studies "experts" hawking their latest "product" whether this is a book, a feature article in the dead tree media, or an on-line blog.

Furthermore, rather than critically examining the monolithic mainstream assumptions which most of Maddow's guests are in the business of perpetuating, they are treated with astonishing deference: Ben Smith of Politico, an utterly conventional hack journalist, is "super smart", Dahlia Lithwick, a purveyor of ur-centrist conventional wisdom is "a big pal of the Rachel Maddow show", Ryan Lizza formerly of the New Republic and now at the New Yorker, is not asked about his disgraceful reporting on Bush's WMD fantasies which helped to set the stage for the Iraq invasions, but for his "analysis" of this or that aspect of the Democratic horserace.

In Maddow's defense, it should be noted that other frequent guests do appear who are fully capable of challenging the bland narrative of what Jim Hightower has called dead armadillo centrism. Among these are the Nation's John Nichols, the syndicated columnists David Sirota, Glenn Greenwald and Lew Dubose. But all too frequently under the imposed framework of Maddow's questions the fundamental differences between the genuine left and the corporate centrists are blunted and papered over. Thus, [a recent edition of TRMS](#) found Nichols holding forth on the phalanx of VP prospects under consideration by the Obama camp: the superficial viability of one in garnering "lunch box" voters, the geographical balance provided by another, the Irish Catholic roots of another, the "olive branch to the Clinton wing" of the party provided by another. The obvious, unacknowledged fact that all were to a greater or lesser degree supporters of the Iraq war, corporate written free trade agreements, the drug war, expanded military budgets, the financial services bailout, etc. is conveniently (from the Democratic Party's standpoint) removed from view as is the fact that the entire field of candidates as whole amounts to one more in the endless series of snubs by Obama directed at the progressive wing of the party in which Maddow implicitly places her hopes for a political

transformation.

Insofar as the terms of her employment dictate her contributing to the manufacturing of a fake consensus masquerading as party unity, Maddow's accommodation to her role is not so easily justified but it needs to be understood and sympathized with. Maddow, like everyone else, has car payments, or the equivalent. "Ex talk show host", the job description of those who do not respect the limits imposed by their employers is not a job which pays the bills. And so one should not equate Maddow carrying out her responsibilities as an employee of Air America (presided over by the well known New York DP functionary Mark Green), with her underlying politics any more than we do our own. The awareness of what is expected of Maddow makes one more grateful for the extent to which one finds her straying far from the reservation where the establishment would, no doubt, prefer her to confine herself.

Many of these episodes occur during the indispensable "Life During Wartime" segments on Iraq and Afghanistan. These continue to open every show even while the occupation has been pushed off the front pages. The reports function to spotlight the daily carnage and ever mounting military and civilian body count, and while virtually any accurate information seeping out of Iraq is unflattering to the administration, much of it also casts a highly unfavorable light on the congressional Democrats who authorized and continue to finance the operation. "Life During Wartime" thereby opens the door for attacks on the congressional leadership for its spinelessness and complicity, most notably of Speaker Pelosi who has come in for her share of harsh criticism.

But once this rhetorical flood gate is opened another one seems to slam shut protecting the essential core of the Democratic partisan infrastructure. And so Maddow's attacks on Pelosi are never coupled with the recognition that voters in San Francisco district are in a position to hold Pelosi accountable by supporting her opponent Cindy Sheehan. This is not possible since Sheehan has become a non-person on Maddow's show and on the Air America network where she had been a frequent guest. Her mortal sin was to have repudiated the Democratic party as complicit in the managing and financing of the war and she has not been heard since.

In so doing, Sheehan joined the other great liberal unmentionable, Ralph Nader, perhaps the only political figure able to cause Maddow to lose her sense of humor. The mere mention of Nader finds Maddow becoming shrill, tense and unfunny. Liberally deploying the epithet "turd in the punchbowl" which she affixed to him during the 2004 campaign, the phrase is spat out with a venom never in evidence even when Maddow is directing her invective at the most odious of right wing thugs.

Into this mix one more complication should be added: Maddow has not displayed much enthusiasm for the Democratic standard bearer, basing her criticisms on more or less the same pages as those on which Nader is basing his insurgent campaign. Most strikingly, Maddow has on at least one occasion mentioned that she has not committed to voting for Obama in the firmly safe state of Massachusetts, leaving open the small possibility that she will sit this one out, as a few progressives have [suggested they will](#).

Maddow's intense animus towards Nader seems to be a reflection of the war which Maddow, and many others on the left are fighting not so much with Nader but with themselves. As the Democratic Party continues its rightward drift, their investment in the grassroots, activist base as a vehicle for progressive change becomes increasingly obviously a lemon. But just like the neighbor who bought the Edsel and continues to gush that it's a fine automobile despite misfiring cylinders, the muffler dragging on the pavement, and the duct tape keeping the trunk closed, so too are Progressive Democrats in denial of the long history of the Democratic Party functioning as the abattoir for progressive movements. Obama 2008 is nothing more or less than the most recent entry in the ledger of a campaign functioning in this capacity. Those who are most aware of the history, like Maddow herself, are usually the least able to perform the necessary feat of doublethink required to rally around the party flag. And they are apt to become the most defensive when they are forced to recognize the obvious and uncomfortable contradictions underlying their support.

That Maddow is at least conflicted on this point may be an indication that the well worn path from left muckraker into cynicism and hackery, like so many before her might not be inevitable in her case. The hopes of the left are based on this and lead to the not altogether unrealistic expectation that as a network anchor she will remain a loose canon, picking and choosing her opportunities to inject occasional doses of reality into the consistent stream of reportorial fantasy perpetuated by the MSM.

It is perhaps a bit comical to recognize that just as we are asking these sorts of questions about Maddow's commitment to the left, MSNBC management has asked similar questions and already received an answer to their satisfaction-or at least so we can infer. In particular, MSNBC's parent company, GE, a major defense contractor is, apparently, willing to bet that Maddow will not use her media access to spotlight the useless and destabilizing weapons systems it produces. The NBC media empire has been convinced that Maddow is ultimately unlikely to turn her attention to the grossly disproportionate share of the media spectrum which NBC and other media giants have been provided by the 1996 communications bill. The financial wing of the company is reassured that Maddow will not be advocating too stridently for putting it on the hook for its deceitful practices in marketing subprime loans. And the manufacturing division is confident that Maddow will not be poking her nose into the environmental apocalypse which GE has visited on the Hudson and Housatonic rivers through its decades long practice of dumping PCBs. Maddow may turn out to be excessively partisan for some GE board members in effectively trashing the Republicans, but insofar as the Democratic Party remains safely in corporate hands- as is assured during an Obama administration- GE has no real basis for concern that it will have helped to create a monster in Maddow.

This evaluation of Maddow will, no doubt, be seen as more than a little cynical particularly in a political season dominated by "hope" and may be, in fact, since what is being inquired into are Maddow's underlying motivation and values. These are, of course, ultimately unknowable; but while granting this fact in the main, when it comes to media personalities, bitter experience should have taught us by now that we have plenty

of grounds for assuming the worst. A few examples should suffice to demonstrate the point: disgraced NY Times reporter Judith Miller began her career as a correspondent for the Pacifica radio network and the Progressive. The far right propagandist David Horowitz was an editor of the legendary new left monthly Ramparts. Fox News anchor Brit Hume began his journalistic career working under muckraker and Nixon antagonist Jack Anderson in which capacity he was placed under CIA surveillance.

It doesn't seem likely that Maddow's ultimate position on the media spectrum will be on the far right with these and so many others. More likely, she will slowly mature away from her youthful dalliances with extremism becoming a reliable and respected purveyor of the Washington Consensus, perhaps moderately inflected by the residue of her prior, long dormant left commitments. A premonition of this ultimate trajectory is provided by [an appearance](#) by Maddow on MSNBC's Dan Abrams show last March. Paired with the vile liberal hawk Peter Beinart to discuss the Democratic front-runners' national security views, Beinart, manipulatively, but quite correctly, characterized the left (and by extension the Democrats) as regarding "global warming as more of a threat than an al quaida attack." Maddow responded by vehemently condemning what she characterized as a slur by Beinart against Democrats and progressives. To rank global warming above al quaida as threat to national security was "a weird idea", "perverse", the product of of a "twisted mind." What was striking was not so much the absurdity of the party line position: of course the near certainty of complete planetary destruction due to global warming is an infinitely more serious threat than that presented by "Islamic terrorism", according to any rational analysis, at least.

Rather what was on display was Maddow's willingness to marshal her formidable intellectual arsenal in defense of this flat earth proposition-albeit one which is firmly cemented within the media manufactured consensus. In so doing Maddow provided a clue as to why GE/MSNBC regards her as a worthy recipient of their trust. The GE public relations and lobbying departments have, after all, invested billions over the years in attempting to establish similar flat earth propositions among them the claim that PCBs have no deleterious effects on aquatic ecosystems, that the "star wars" missile defense is technically viable, that hundreds of billions of dollars in subprime loans packaged into a baroque investment securities provides a stable foundation for home ownership. These are packaged and placed before the public in the shiniest of media wrappers-phrases carefully crafted by wordsmiths as verbally gifted, well educated and hip as Maddow, supported by junk science (when necessary) produced by the most disciplined and highly trained professionals, and when all else fails, defended in the courts by the cleverest, savviest and sharpest legal minds on GE's corporate consul staff. While the claims remain no less absurd, eventually the public, through endless repetition grows to accept them rather than dismissing them with ridicule and contempt.

While this segment, one hopes, is not representative of where Maddow is headed, it luridly demonstrates that even the most principled, critical and flexible minds of every generation ultimately purchase their ticket for entry onto the road to "success" in the deeply pathological society we have become.

Let's hope that Maddow and many more will become the exceptions.