

My Challenge to Rush Limbaugh

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Rush Limbaugh's challenge to debate President Obama should not, and of course will not, be taken seriously by the White House. Debating a clownish, if frightening, entertainer like Limbaugh, even if he is, as Rahm Emanuel and others have pointed out, the de facto leader of the rudderless Republican Party, would certainly not be the best use of the president's time, nor would it set a particularly good precedent.

While I never have been able to stand Rush Limbaugh, I recognize that he is very smart and extremely media savvy. Picking this fight with the new president and offering to debate him is just the most recent way in which Limbaugh has demonstrated this. In politics, it is always to your advantage to get in a conflict, or even a debate, with somebody more powerful than you. At the local level, for example, a candidate for City Council gains in stature if she has a conflict with the mayor, while a mayor has nothing to gain, politically, from sharing a stage with a candidate for a more minor office.

A similar dynamic is at play between Limbaugh and Obama. If, in some strange alternate universe Obama were to agree to debate Limbaugh, no matter how badly Obama humiliated Limbaugh, Limbaugh would gain in status by engaging with the President of the United States, while Obama would lose some dignity and gravitas simply by sharing a stage or studio with a cranky extremist radio personality like Limbaugh.

A direct confrontation with Limbaugh would be bad for Obama and almost certainly will not happen, but the elevation of Limbaugh is good for Obama and the Democrats. As Limbaugh, who combines a discredited right wing ideology with a demographic profile that makes it difficult for the party to expand beyond its insufficient base, increasingly becomes understood as the real leader of the Republican Party, the party will slink increasingly further away from mainstream America and political relevance. Moreover, Limbaugh's proudly repeated boast that he is rooting for Obama to fail, while red meat to the Republican base, cannot be playing well with the millions of Americans of all political views who are hoping for the president to succeed in his efforts to right our economy. Limbaugh's angry and blustery style is emblematic of the past in American politics and precisely the kind of style against which the people voted in November.

The group that is injured the most by Limbaugh's rising prominence in his party is not Democrats, but moderate Republicans. This admittedly small faction within that party is an essential ingredient of any Republican recovery. Without a strong moderate wing of the party, the Republicans simply will not be able to grow and compete with the, now majority, Democratic Party. It is very possible that over time, the moderate wing of the party will make a comeback, but Limbaugh's ascension postpones that likely eventuality.

A Republican Party that is not buoyed by a moderate wing, while more annoying, presents less of a threat to Obama's ambitious programs and agenda; and keeping Limbaugh front and center in the Republican Party, makes the work of moderate Republicans far more difficult. The Republican Party needs to be the home for moderate conservatives who, for example, are concerned about the economy, have mixed feelings of the stimulus bill, don't like high taxes, but don't really care about gay marriage or abortion. Limbaugh scares these people off; and, for now, Obama seems to still have their support.

Thus far, the administration, and the Democratic Party leadership, seem to understand the value of Limbaugh's rising role in the Republican Party, as well as the parallel need to avoid any direct confrontation with him. Allowing Limbaugh to lead the Republican Party into a more confrontational and belligerent opposition will also make it easier for the administration to explain the difficulties they have encountered trying to embrace a new bipartisan spirit for which many had hoped. There is no easier way for the administration to explain this than to simply point out that if Rush Limbaugh is the new face of the Republican Party than bipartisanship, in this circumstance, is not only almost impossible, but irresponsible as well. At the same time, Obama can continue to leverage his enormous popularity to win the relatively small number of votes he needs from Republicans in the senate to reach cloture on proposed legislation.

This is not a particularly easy balance to maintain; and it may get more difficult as Limbaugh will probably keep attacking Obama and banging the debate drum even more loudly. Limbaugh may even begin to accuse Obama, rather implausibly, of lacking the courage to debate him. If, however, it makes Rush Limbaugh feel any better, I will take up his offer and defend my president, by debating with Limbaugh anytime, online, in the studio or in person.