

ABC News Primetime interview: Country music group holds its own against right-wing attack

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ABC News's *Primetime* interview with the country music group the Dixie Chicks on April 24 was one of the more grotesque examples of the US media's attempt to intimidate political dissent and distort public opinion. Entitled "Landslide: the Dixie Chicks," the program set out to vastly exaggerate the right-wing backlash against a comment made by a member of the group, Natalie Maines, at a March 10 concert in London, nine days before the US-led attack on Iraq. Maines said, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

All in all, the Dixie Chicks held up well against the crude attempts by interviewer Diane Sawyer to browbeat them and convince them, as well as the viewing audience, that the vast majority of Americans consider any opposition to President Bush and the Iraq war tantamount to treason.

The band's three members demonstrated a considerable degree of integrity and resilience, defending their right to question and criticize the government and express their opinions. Sawyer failed to get the definitive "mea culpa" she was desperately seeking from Maines. This was not for lack of trying on the part of *Primetime's* producers.

The program opened with scenes of the war with a voice-over from an enraged country music fan on a talk-radio program saying: "I think they should send Natalie to Iraq, strap her to a bomb and just drop her over Baghdad." This clip was repeated later, along with images of country music fans and their young children stomping on Dixie Chicks CDs and riding over them with tractors.

Sawyer described Maines' comments as "a 15-word sentence" that "would become political nitroglycerine and blow apart [the Dixie Chicks'] lives." She began the interview by asking Maines: "Do you feel awful about saying that about the president of the United States?"

Sawyer said she found Maines' statements even more incomprehensible because they were made at a time when "70 percent of Americans were clear that it was time to go to war." Sawyer did not reveal the source of her claim of overwhelming popular support for the war, but she was presumably referring to opinion polls conducted by the media at the time. These polls

were carefully rigged to produce the desired results, but even on their own terms, they revealed a popular mood far different from the unambiguous war fever suggested by Sawyer—a fact of which she is well aware.

Aside from her gross distortion of social and political reality in America, Sawyer's posture was remarkable for its combination of slavish conformism and ignorance. Like the vast majority of her peers among the lavishly paid media performers, Sawyer lacks any democratic sensibility. The notion that one could or should oppose the "commander-in-chief" was utterly foreign to her limited thought processes.

Maines answered Sawyer by explaining that she made her comments "out of frustration." She continued: "At the moment, on the eve of war, I had a lot of questions that I felt were unanswered." She added, "I personally felt like, why tomorrow? Why can't we find the chemical weapons first? Why tomorrow?" While saying she had spoken off the cuff and regretted the tone of her remark, Maines defended her right to express her opinion and question government policy: "I ask questions. That's smart, to find out the facts."

Sawyer, however, was aghast. "There are people," she said, "who were shocked that someone would stand on a stage and attack the commander in chief." Maines replied that she had been upset over Bush's attitude towards the protesters who were demonstrating en masse against the war at that point. She objected to Bush's dismissal of millions of protesters as a "focus group," commenting that she would have liked to have heard him say: "I appreciate that these are compassionate citizens of the United States."

Group member Martie Maguire added: "I really felt like there was a lack of compassion every time I heard Bush speak about this." She also said she disagreed with Bush's repeated statements to the effect that "you are either with us or against us."

In other words, like tens of millions of other Americans, these talented musicians were appalled by the combination of arrogance, inhumanity and stupidity that are the trademarks of the man who occupies the White House, by dint of a stolen election.

In response to Sawyer's incessant push for an apology, Maines replied that she might have phrased her comments differently if she had given them more thought. She said: "Am I sorry that I said *that*? Yes. Am I sorry that I spoke out? No. Am I sorry that I ask questions and don't just follow? No."

Maguire read a quote from Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, which supports the right of critics of the government to speak out: "To announce that there must be no criticism of the president, or that we are to stand by the president, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public." Sawyer had no comment.

Natalie Maines took issue with those who said she should not criticize government policy because US soldiers had sacrificed their lives to defend the right to free speech. She said, "People say people have died to give me this right. I think, yeah, they didn't die for me not to use it."

ABC then interviewed soldiers in Iraq on their attitude toward the Dixie Chicks' statement. Even here they failed to illicit hostility to the musicians. While one or two soldiers expressed disagreement with Maine's statements, most said the group had a right to its opinions and added that they would not stay away if the band was asked to perform for the troops. Sawyer reported, not surprisingly, that the US military had no plans to invite the Dixie Chicks to entertain the troops.

Group member Emily Robison expressed her shock and anxiety over threats by right-wing opponents against the band members and their families. These have included death threats and warnings of violence against their property. The group has been forced to beef up security for its concerts, using metal detectors and taking other precautions.

Robison also said it was despicable for these elements to use young children to protest against her fellow band-member's remarks. "I can't believe people would bring their children to a bulldozing—to bulldoze art," she said.

Despite ABC's attempt to portray the backlash against the Dixie Chicks as representative of an American population enthusiastic about the Bush administration and its war policy, the boycott campaign is anything but a "grassroots" response. It is rather a carefully orchestrated campaign spearheaded by the extreme-right FreeRepublic.com web site and Cox Radio and Cumulus Broadcasting, two large country music radio broadcasters that control as much as a third of US country stations.

Clear Channel, the radio conglomerate that owns more than 1,200 local radio stations nationwide, dominating 60 percent of the rock radio market, has also played a central role in the McCarthyite witch-hunt against the Dixie Chicks, aimed at destroying their careers and placing their lives in danger from threats of violence. Following the group's anti-Bush statement, Clear Channel removed their songs from its play list. Clear Channel has close ties to the Bush administration. L. Lowry Mays, the company's chairman, is a Texan with long-standing financial and political ties to the Bush family and Republican

Party. [See "The ties that bind: Media giant headed by Bush cronies promotes Iraq war"]

Incidents such as the tractor-bulldozing of the group's CDs were given sensationalist coverage by the media in an attempt to portray the backlash as a widespread phenomenon. The vast majority of Dixie Chicks fans, however, are unmoved by the right-wing campaign. As the *Primetime* segment noted, the group begins a 59-show tour this Thursday, May 1, with virtually all of the arena venues sold out. Their album "Home" has sold 6 million copies and is a strong number three on the country music charts.

The attitudes of the band's members—and the sentiment expressed in Maines' statement—are representative of a broad section of the American population, which is largely politically uneducated, through no fault of its own, but generally holds left-liberal, progressive and humane views. Millions are repulsed by Bush and identify with the Dixie Chicks' mistrust of government policy. This appears to be true even among country music listeners, a relatively larger percentage of whom live in more rural regions where support for Bush is proportionately higher than in the country as a whole.

Sawyer and the *Primetime* producers attempted, on the one hand, to portray the Dixie Chicks as spiraling toward disaster as a result of Maines' statement, while, on the other, noting facts that pointed to their continued popularity with the general public. They made no attempt to explain this obvious contradiction.

At the program's conclusion, Sawyer made one last effort to elicit a groveling apology, asking if Maines wished to be "forgiven" for her anti-Bush statement. Maines responded: "Forgive us? What am I trying to say here ... accept us. Don't forgive us for who we are."

Asked if she would have anything to say to the president if he were listening, she replied, "Your show's not long enough."



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